

HAVE BLASTER, WILL TRAVEL

TALES OF THE BULLDOGS



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Foreword

Bulldogs! is a strange project. It started over 20 years ago as a shared universe among a group of role-players, and has evolved since then with many different groups collaborating and adding to it as they come in contact with the shared setting. This eventually culminated in the publication of the *Bulldogs!* role-playing game, allowing many, many more people to put their own stamp on the setting and add new extra details. There is a lot of new details out there that even I don't know about.

What I do know is that I wanted some of the most talented authors around to play in this shared setting, and that's what inspired *Have Blaster, Will Travel*. Each author was handed the same setting and basic premise: the Bulldogs, rough-and-tumble types stuck in a terrible and dangerous job, delivering hazardous cargo between the stars in a strange galaxy that is not our own. A vague premise, but one that seemed to create some vivid scenarios. Seeing what each of our different authors came up with based on these guidelines has been a great pleasure.

Every story in this collection features the Bulldogs one way or another, but every story has a unique perspective on both the Bulldogs and the galaxy as a whole. All of these different perspectives added together create a deeper, more detailed picture of these imaginary places than could be conceived by a single mind.

I want to thank each of these authors for coming to this project and putting a their individual creative sparks into it. This was a special project for me. I got to see some greatly talented authors write within a setting I presented. I'm proud to be part of this. I think as a reader you will find these stories just as interesting as I did, and even if you don't know the Bulldogs, by the end of this anthology you certainly will.

Motherlode

by Sarah Newton

It was a starport bar. It could have been anywhere, but it was nowhere. Or, more specifically, it was on the blasted iceball called Ozymandias, the last inhabited place on the furthest edge of the Nebelorn Polypolity. Beyond it the Strix Nebula gave way to the endless suffocating blackness of the Kardisharn Dust Clouds, haunted by ghost ships and the decaying bones of dead planets, the cold embers of dying stars.

“The motherlode...”

From above, seen through the rime-encrusted plass of the star-deck, the Old Timer lay splayed like a starfish, gasping out his life into the uncaring, smoke-filled air. A clearing had appeared around him, as people edged away, turned on barstools and cast glances of mock-concern his way.

“Tanagra!”

From his chest, the knife protruded like a sundial gnomon; the hour before darkness settled over the Old Timer’s eyes. Next to him kneeled a man in the black and maroon uniform of a Bulldog, the high-risk shipping agents of TransGalaxy PgC. His graying hair was shaven in a bullet-like crew cut, his steely eyes and strong expression betraying him as a hardened soldier, and yet he cradled the Old Timer’s head, staring bleakly into his eyes. The Old Timer’s scuffed and faded jacket was the same black and maroon, but older, at the end of its life.

Flecks of blood spattered the Old Timer’s lips. “The motherlode, Bulldog! Tanagra! You gotta protect the motherlode...! Don’t let—those bastards—take it...”

Gnarled knuckles clutched at the man’s lapels; the Old Timer heaved his head upwards as he gasped out his last words. Then—nothing. His eyes went out, a long hoarse rattle escaped from his

throat, and his head fell back, lifeless.

§ § §

“Say, Sarge, we really gonna do that? A crazy-ass goose chase ‘cos of some old dead guy in a bar?”

Tasha Del Vayne broke into a run to keep up with the Sarge, who punched the primary airlock in the Ozymandias docking bay and thundered onto the *Fireamber’s* bridge.

“Captain on deck!” With a startled expression, a huge bear of a man in a light chain vest and pilot’s fatigues jumped to his feet, standing to attention and looking directly ahead with his one good eye. Lief “Gunner” Gunnarsson’s other eye socket, studded with nav-implants, was a mass of wiring which blended seamlessly with his long blond dreadlocks and ample beard.

The rest of the bridge was empty. Even at the best of times, the Sarge had never been able to fill its multiple crew stations, and its well-maintained but clearly aging interior rattled with echoes of former greatness.

“That wasn’t just any crazy old man, Del Vayne,” snapped the Sarge, mashing his cigar into the side of his mouth and advancing to the center of the oversized semi-circular bridge, clearly built for a crew of a larger stature. “That old timer was a Bulldog, and that means something, kid. We look after our own.”

Del Vayne blinked enthusiastically, hauling herself up to her short but svelte five-five. She had the ruddy and wide-eyed innocence of any of a million farm girls from the backwater agri-worlds, and the youth on her skin was so new it was transparent. She was pert, too, with dark hair and dark eyes that not even the Sarge could grouch at for long. Even now, seeing her hanging on his every word, his anger began to subside.

“Where the hell is everyone, anyhow?”

The pilot twitched visibly, half observing the Sarge, half the display scrolling through his nav-implant. “Gorgo’s down in engineer-

ing, sir. We were trying to get those thruster cut-outs locked down...”

“And that’s it? No fresh meat? No one answered?”

Gunnarsson screwed up his face. “Sorry, Sarge... Since that last meat-job, no one’s answering our ads. We lost Lom, Trask, and Stromfal on that mission... word like that gets around.”

“God-dammit!” yelled the Sarge, fury flaring again, whirling from the pilot and waving his arms like he didn’t want to hear. He punched the comm on the nearby bulkhead. “Gorgo? Get your god-damn three-legged ass up here, stat!”

§ § §

Truth was, they always got the meat-jobs. Any contract with a greater than even chance of seeing bodies hit the floor seemed to come their way. Same as the thrusters always cut out when you needed them, Del Vayne asked dumb-ass questions, and the Sarge woke up shouting with horror in his bunk at night. The universe was just made that way.

Dolom engineer Gorgomallius Champoç frowned, blinking his three eyes as he scrutinized the datascreen in two of his hands. With the third, he scrolled through the display. His huge bulk stood in the center of the bridge like a towering tripod of blue flesh, clad in the dull orange of an engineering coverall; his three trunk-like legs rested immovably on the studded metal deck, his massive bald head brushing the bulkhead ceiling ten feet above. He seemed oblivious to everything but the device before him.

“The primary reference for the term ‘Tanagra’ is a legendary battle on prehistoric Arsubar,” he said, in a calm even voice. “That doesn’t seem applicable, Captain Falco.”

The Sarge winced. Even the new kid Del Vayne had twigged that using his real name bugged the hell out of him quicker than this quarter-ton blue-ball. “Ya think?” he grimaced, pulling the cigar from his teeth and spitting. “What the hell else is there?”

“Tanagra: recreational sex drug for the Copulympic Marathon

on Priapius-12?” the engineer read off the display.

Tasha Del Vayne’s eyes widened, her teeth flashing in an excited smile. “A *marathon*? Where’s *that*?”

“Never you mind,” growled the Sarge, wrenching his pale blue eyes from the way Del Vayne licked her lips. “Dammit, Gorgo... Did that Old Timer look like he was smuggling sex meds?”

The Dolom stared at him impassively. “I was not there, Captain. I have no impression of what the ‘Old Timer’ might have or not have done. Crewman Gunnarsson and I were here—” he raised one of his huge, snakelike arms, and gestured towards the pilot, who had folded his arms and was staring at the deck, shaking his head. “Oh. I see,” the Dolom said, suddenly aware of the Sarge’s glare. “It was a rhetorical question... Um. Let me read you the next entry.”

The Sarge paused, before slotting the cigar back between clenched teeth. “Please...”

“Tanagra: C-class asteroid in the Rourke’s Star belt, clays and carbonates covering a hydrate layer over a metal-rich core. Detailed survey unavailable.”

Lief Gunnarsson raised his head. “Rourke’s Star is less than a week away in standard transit. The Old Timer could easily have come from there.”

The Sarge grimaced. “I know Rourke’s Star. It used to be an Arsubaran system, before the Kadrassi Succession War. The Sytane Conglomerate’s been sniffing around there ever since. Looks like the Old Timer may have had a claim-jumper...” He looked away for a moment, lost in thought.

“Captain, is there a problem?” The Dolom regarded him levelly.

“Nothing. Just old memories.” The Sarge rubbed his forehead, as though he could wipe them away.

Through the forward bulkhead viewport, a couple of load-lifters were rearranging hazmat crates by the docking bay blast doors. “And now it’s the Sytane Conglomerate...” the Sarge rasped. “God-

damn Saldrallans? I *hate* snakes.”

For a moment no one spoke. Everyone had secrets from before they joined the Bulldogs, and no one pried. The Sarge’s old life in the Arsubaran military was his own affair, as was anything between him and the snakelike agents of the Saldrallan Empire which encroached on the Polypolity more and more every year.

Del Vayne’s eyes flashed. “Anyway, we’re shipping out, right?” she asked, buzzing with building excitement. “Lock and load!”

Gunnarsson unfolded his arms, shaking his head. Del Vayne would have been just a kid during the Succession War; she’d never tasted the bitter ashes of defeat. He hauled himself back into the pilot’s seat and locked his retinal implants to the navigation computer, punching the holomatrix, welcoming the distraction.

The Dolom still stood in the center of the bridge, a rippling blue mountain of muscle. “Captain, may I remind you we’re scheduled to meet the TransGalaxy representative in three standard days. We cannot leave now...”

The Sarge wrinkled his nose as though someone had made a foul smell. “Gunnarsson. File an SOS & Salvage report with starport control, leave a message for TG we had to haul ass. Reschedule for... three weeks from now.” He didn’t take his eyes off the Dolom.

“Captain, the money...” Engineer Gorgo began. “The thruster cut-outs. We still haven’t got to the bottom of them. Our employment with TransGalaxy... to risk it for—”

“Can it, Gorgo,” scowled the Sarge. He turned to address everyone. “I told Del Vayne, now I’m telling everyone. That Old Timer was a Bulldog, and *we look after our own!* If there’s a motherlode claim on that Rourke’s Star rock, he told us about it for a reason. A couple of weeks’ AWOL could set us up for life, then we can all quit shipping shit for TransGalaxy! I’ll carry the can when we get back. Anyone don’t like it can get off here!”

The Sarge held his cigar before his mouth, and looked round the bridge, as though expecting a challenge. Lief Gunnarsson was

immersed in pre-flight calculations, his eyes and hands flickering through unseen holomatrices. Tasha Del Vayne pushed out her ample chest and saluted with a dazzling grin, before turning and hauling *that pert ass* to the weapons locker, the Sarge's eyes following it the whole way. And the Dolom stood in the center of the bridge, still holding the datascreen. Slowly, his head spun 360 degrees, taking in the whole show. It finished up facing the Sarge, who stared back.

"Um. I'll... go get the thrusters back online..." the engineer mumbled. He saluted with his spare arm.

"You do that, Crewman." The Sarge chewed on his cigar. "Let's get the hell off this iceball and haul ass!"

§ § §

Even rebadged for Class D freight, the *Fireamber* looked as sexy as hell. She was a decommissioned Ryjyllian battle corvette, fifty meters nose-to-tip and still in her original black-and-white striped livery, built like a giant space cat about to pounce. Everything about her smooth curves and blistering hard points said sleek and dangerous. The way she dropped out of hyperspace in the Rourke's Star system was like she knew she looked good.

"Watch out for snoop-stations, everyone. If the Sytane Conglomerate has an outpost here, you can bet your ass they ain't selling sodas."

Lief Gunnarsson peered into the tac holo glowing amber in front of the nav station. "On it already, Sarge. Tracking a vector wake... Stand by... Shit! Got a bogey! Looks like they're coming to check us out!"

"Any trace of the target? How big is this rock anyway?"

"About 900 klicks, Sarge. Upper range dwarf planet, but there's a hell of a lot of rocks in this system."

"Well, find it, dammit! We're sitting ducks here!"

Del Vayne looked up from the comms station. "Sarge, I've got a hail from the bogey."

“On screen!”

The oval forward viewport flickered, and the huge, feline head of a Ryjyllian loomed over them, tan fur and darker mane, brilliant green eyes with hugely dilated pupils. In the background, the Sarge made out the serpentine coils of a Saldrallan crew. The Ryjyllian bared its teeth.

“...shameful assault on our honor!” it was snarling in a menacing version of Galactic. “True warriors fought and died bravely in that vessel you are polluting, Arsubaran. Surrender it immediately!”

“Shit...” Cursing under his breath, the Sarge straightened his back and met the feline’s withering gaze. “Please accept our apologies,” he began, struggling to remember the formula, “we meant no disrespect to you or your clan. We’re on a salvage mission from TransGalaxy, we had no idea there was a Ryjyllian presence in this system. This ship has been formally decommissioned and repurposing papers issued at Galactic Central Point. My name is Loren Falco, Captain of the *Fireamber*, and my word is my bond.” Behind his back he crossed his fingers.

The Ryjyllian’s ears pricked up in surprise. “You dare use the clan greeting, Arsubaran? Surrender your vessel now! I am Ayawr of the Meeyar clan, Captain of the Sytane Conglomerate System Defense Force, and I *will* count coup!”

Shit. “Evasive!” yelled the Sarge, lunging towards the secondary gunner’s station and kicking the combat webbing into action. The Ryjyllian’s name marked the merc as female, but the Meeyar clan he hadn’t heard of, which was bad news. It would be a minor clan bent on glory, with a chip on its shoulder a mile high. Coupled with a crew of lethal snakelike Saldrallans, it spelled bad news.

“I said evasive!” The combat holo leaped up around him, the Ryjyllian’s vessel streaking inwards like a flaming meteor.

“Gorgo!” yelled Gunnarsson, punching holo controls. “I need those thrusters!”

A green light flashed in his holo. “Sarge! We’ve located Tanager!”

The Sarge grimaced. “Swell. Get us the hell out of here!”

There was a sudden explosion, and the reddening bridge lights flickered, the deck shuddering as the inertial compensators struggled to cope. “Shields holding!” shouted Del Wayne.

“Gorgo...!” Gunnarsson’s voice was hoarse with desperation.

The Dolom crackled calmly through the comm. “The thrust capacitors have decoupled from the primary power routers, Pilot. I’ll need a few moments to patch through to the secondaries. Assuming our earlier repairs are still holding.”

Another blast, this time off the port dorsal shielding. The Ryjyllian’s vessel was right on top of them!

The Sarge lost himself in the combat holo. Without Gunnarsson’s implants, he lacked total immersion, but long experience shut out all distractions to a laser-sharp focus. His fingers flying deftly over the controls, the holodisplay swung wildly and rotated his viewpoint up and out, to the Ryjyllian’s ship bearing down on them. The Sarge almost shouted: a Saldrallan Viper-class close assault striker, its mean, needle-like hull looming enormous in his vision. So the snakes were behind this, after all!

With reflexes honed from years of combat, the Sarge fired a volley from the *Fireamber*’s dorsal blaster array, strafing the Viper’s scale-patterned underside as it swept overhead. It flared green, stippling its shields, and then was gone, flashing past in the blink of an eye. The combat holo gyred wildly, trying to re-acquire.

“That should do it...” the Dolom’s voice droned incongruously over the comm. “Thrusters should be online now. Lief, could you—”

“Evasive engaged!” shouted Gunnarsson, and the compensators lurched as the *Fireamber* back-flipped and spun onto its new heading towards their destination. “Full thrust!”

Intense vibration shook the *Fireamber*’s superstructure as the

boosters kicked in, coupled with a basso profundo drone just at the edge of hearing that made their chests shudder. The starfield ahead twisted as they dove in-system, the needle-like Viper behind them disappearing in the deep black.

“Can we outrun them?” shouted the Sarge above the roar.

The Rourke’s Star system was noted for its debris field. It was a young star, with an accretion disk multiple AU deep, still in the throes of its fiery transformation into a solar system. It was a navigational nightmare from hell, with raw materials drifting around for the taking. If you were lucky.

“I’m gonna try and lose them in the third orbit band!” replied Gunnarsson, gritting his teeth and keeping his hands steady on the holocontrols. “We can’t maintain this velocity for long without smashing into something! From there we should be able to cross to the adjacent orbit once we near Tanagra...”

The inertial compensators lurched nauseatingly, dragging their stomachs this way and that; the viewscreen stippled with micro-explosions as they plowed through meteoritic debris clouds. One explosion, larger than the rest, set the shield alarms wailing.

“We’re gonna have to slow down. I could use gunnery support!”

Del Vayne’s laughter peeled above the roar, as she bit ruby-red lips and raised a second combat holomatrix around her station. “Howdy, Sarge...” her breathy voice husked in the Sarge’s ear five meters away, as the two holomatrices converged.

“Quit foolin’, Del Vayne,” he shouted, pumping bolt after bolt of blaster fire into the looming asteroid debris, which exploded hugely in the viewscreen, bathing the bridge in a lurid orange light.

“Wooo-hooo!” howled Del Vayne ecstatically from her station, teeth bared in a snarl. “Let’s clear the way!”

Through the debris field the *Fireamber* swept, crackling with blaster fire, spiraling and gyring with lightning reactions through the unending pounding hail. The Sarge found his mouth curling from a snarl into a smile, giddy with exhilaration and danger. Del Vayne

whispered and laughed in his ear, and together they fended off wave after wave of lethal flak.

Then they were through. Suddenly, blackness, and a huge object loomed in the viewscreen, dark, heavy, ominous, blotting out the stars.

“Tanagra...” breathed Gunnarsson, dreadlocks dripping with sweat. “Am I pleased to see you. Come to daddy.” He nuzzled the ship into its vast, blanketing shadow.

Of the pursuing Viper, there was no sign.

§ § §

“What the hell is this?”

The asteroid was huge, spherical, more a dwarf planet than a chunk of rock, nine hundred kilometers across. Its surface was an endless grey plain of dust and accretia, jagged with upheavals and pocked with craters. In the infrared some of them still glowed.

By the ejecta field in the lee of one of the craters they found the defenses. A light cloud of battle debris hung in orbit directly above - the remains of a small craft, maybe a fighter or prospector. Below, a gaping hole in the outer crater wall was flanked by surface-to-orbit missile emplacements and tracking laser arrays, all heavily battle-scarred. In the center, where a crevasse opened deep into the asteroid's interior, clung a docking station and the scuffed yet shining exterior of an airlock module.

Gunnarsson swore softly.

Del Wayne gazed out the viewport, reflections of the passing moonscape in her eyes. “Jeez, Sarge... what the hell was the Old Timer doing here?”

The Sarge's breathing was still staccato. “I don't know, kid,” he rasped, standing close. His thoughts ricocheted with the memories of blaster bolts, the shouts of desperate and outnumbered soldiers, the bodies of the innocent.

“It looks like he had enough to fight off an entire army.”

§ § §

The airlock was a prefab, like any one of a billion modules used by miners and homesteaders clear across the galaxy. It cycled with a reliable clunk.

“There’s air, Captain Falco,” said the Dolom, studying the hand scanner. “Low pressure. And CO2 levels are somewhat high. I recommend breathers.”

The Sarge flipped back the bubble helm on his zero-G combat suit and clipped the breather tube over his nostrils. He drifted to the packed dirt floor in the microgravity, hefting the thin barrel of his Kaminar Systems coherent beamer and waiting for the inner doors to retract.

“No recoil weapons, anyone. This microgravity will throw us all over the walls. Stick to lasers. And that means you, Del Vayne. You got me?”

Del Vayne pouted, holstering her Old ‘65 Penetrator Classic. Slug throwers were still all they had on the benighted backwater agri-world she’d called home before signing up, and she loved the oversized ballistic pistol for its reassuring weight and the massive damage it could inflict even on shielded targets. Reluctantly, she unclipped the laser rifle from her backpack. It looked like a pea shooter in comparison.

“Gunnarsson, you still reading us?” The Sarge held his hand to his earpiece.

“Copy that, Sarge,” replied the pilot’s voice from the ship slung to the docking bay fifty meters away. “Although I’m picking up interference from the ferrous deposits in the crater wall clays. I don’t know how long we’ll be able to maintain contact.”

“We’ll check in regular. Keep your eyes peeled for that Viper.”

Cautiously, they stepped out of the airlock, their feet crunching lightly in dust and russet gravel, small plumes rising in the micro-

gravity. Sarge shook his head, wrung a finger in one ear trying to clear it.

Del Wayne mumbled something indistinct next to him, frowning.

“What?”

“I said there’s something wrong with my ears!” she shouted.

“It’s the air pressure,” said the Dolom in a loud voice. “Sound isn’t travelling as well.”

“Don’t get distracted!” called the Sarge. “Keep your eyes peeled. Can anyone smell that?”

It was faint, but got stronger as they advanced into the tunnels. A moist, fungal smell. “Smells like... cheese... mushrooms...” said Del Wayne loudly. “Weird... someone cooking?”

There were lights, strung in braids down the main tunnels. To each side, tributaries branched off, unlit, shadows angling past as they advanced. Sarge frowned, staring into the sharp-edged blackness of each, searching for a hidden foe. It was suddenly quiet.

“This place gives me the creeps.” Del Wayne’s cocky smile was subdued.

Engineer Gorgo planted his three legs, staring at the hand scanner with a frown. To either side, braid-lit main tunnels ran off; a crossroads.

“That odor...” the Dolom began. “Not cooking. But it is organic. Lichen or fungus-analog. And... something else.” His head rotated completely around, scanning the shadows in concern.

“Ponics?” The Sarge flicked him a glance.

“Could be, but I don’t think so. The signature isn’t typical ponics compounds.”

Del Wayne had stopped, frowning, cocking her head on one side. “Can anyone hear that?”

“What?” The Sarge raised his laser rifle.

“I dunno. Like a scratching. Squeaking. High-pitched. I can

barely make it out.”

Gorgo shook his head. “Probably phantom sound. Your ears won’t be used to the lack of input, and will be firing off compensatory signals. The blood in your veins, the air in your lungs -”

“No, wait,” the Sarge interrupted. “She’s right. I got it, too.” He stared into space, listening intently.

It was a chittering. A scuttling. Like a thousand critters scabbling over rock in the far distance. Except in the low air pressure it wouldn’t be far away - and it was getting louder.

“I got movement...!” yelled Del Vayne, hefting her laser rifle. “Lots of it!”

Shadows suddenly flickered hugely down the braid-lit left corridor, and a mass of squirming wriggling motion swept into view. Like a river of legs and feelers, a swarm of insects half the size of a man flooded into the intersection, parting like water to go round them. They stood back to back, targeting the chittering, squeaking horde.

“Sarge?” Del Vayne’s voice strained with tension.

“Hold your fire! They don’t seem to be attacking. Don’t do anything to antagonize them!”

In the microgravity, the insectoids crawled the walls, the floor, the ceiling, clinging with a myriad feet. Engineer Gorgo looked around, bemused, raising his hand scanner and taking readings. His head was closer to the tunnel roof than the rest of them, and one of the critters hung upside-down before his eyes, feelers waving. He raised a hand to grasp it gently... and his thick fingers went straight through its fragile micro-gravity carapace. It squished to a pulp, like a balloon bag filled with goo, dripping through his fingers. He looked over at the Sarge, a horrified look on his face.

The scuttling stopped.

“Oh, shit...”

As one, the insectoids rose up on their hind sections, reach-

ing almost to shoulder height, mandibles and countless pairs of legs clawing the air. They began to sway, side to side, and the chittering turned to a high-pitched howl, haunting in the thin air. One by one, they turned to face the Dolom, and the slimy remnant dripping from his hands.

Del Wayne darted glances around her in increasing panic. She raised her laser rifle, sighted at the nearest insectoid. “Sarge?” her voice was shaking, now.

“Hold fire!” the Sarge yelled again. “God dammit! There are too many of them!”

On his lapel, the comm suddenly crackled to life. “Sarge?” It was the pilot, followed by a nasty blast of static.

“Shit, that’s all we need!” cursed the Sarge, sighting his laser first at one insectoid then another. “Tell me it’s good news, Gunnarsson!”

The pilot’s voice returned in a hiss of whoops and whistles. “Everything’s fine here, Sarge. No sign of pursuit. But the ship sensors just picked up massive life sign readings in your vicinity...”

The Sarge looked around him, mashing his cigar. “No shit... We’re on it, crewman!”

“Sarge... not reading... repeat...” The comm broke up in a blare of hissing static.

“Shit... we’re gonna have to blast our way back to the ship. I’ll lay down covering fire while you two—”

“Captain, wait,” interrupted the Dolom, raising all three arms slowly above his head. “Something’s happening...”

Slowly, the swarm of insectoid creatures was closing in on Gorgo’s position, but not on him. Piece by piece, the critters picked up the remains of the ragged carcass smearing the ground, in mandibles and pincers, delicately. Almost reverently.

“Eww... they gonna *eat* that?” Del Wayne wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“No, I don’t think so,” replied the Dolom wonderingly. “Look,

they're moving away... They seem to be *carrying* the carcass somewhere..."

The Sarge clenched his teeth. "What the hell? I hate weird alien shit..."

But it was true. Like a receding tide, the swarm of creatures was retreating. The forward-most still remained in semi-upright posture, either carrying pieces of their fallen comrade, or clustering round those who did; the rest returned to their prone position, scuttling behind the leaders. Slowly, the tide ebbed down the tunnel from which it had come.

"Captain Falco?" The Dolom looked at the Sarge expectantly.

This time the engineer's use of his name didn't even irritate him. "Hell, yeah," the Sarge groaned, slapping his laser rifle over his shoulder. "Of course we follow. This is weird even in my book. Goddamn alien shit."

§ § §

"We've completely lost the signal from the *Fireamber*," confirmed Gorgo, looking around the gradually widening chamber. "Must be the regolith composition... nodules of hematite, beryllium... This is definitely a rich find, no wonder the Old Timer had—" The Dolom broke off, staring ahead in surprise. "Oh my..."

All through their pursuit the insectoid creatures had ignored them, intent on bearing their burden to their mysterious destination. Now the tunnel and its braided string of lights opened into a huge chamber, partly dug out of the asteroid's rich seams of ore, partly a natural formation, and there the procession of insectoids billowed out to cover its floor, some jumping lightly to the walls in the microgravity, clinging as though straining to look at the rusted but enormous object at the front of the cavern. Above the heads of the lowslung insectoids, they could see it clearly.

It was a robot. Large, as big as a multi-occupancy ATV, and old, covered with pock marks and traces of wear and corrosion. At either

end, rugged-teethed mining bores hung suspended and immobile in mid-air; all along the side facing them, manipulator arms and other appendages held an array of frozen poses. And, on top, a large cylindrical head surveyed everything, covered with sensors and comms outputs, powered down and inert.

“What the hell...?” said the Sarge, pulling the cigar from his mouth and walking forwards. As he advanced, the insectoids fell back, opening a path ahead of him. “The Old Timer...?”

“I don’t think so, Captain,” asserted the Dolom, holding up his hand-scanner. “This device is old, centuries if not more. It’s not showing up on any of my identification scans. It doesn’t even look like it’s been made by any known race... The morphology...”

Del Vayne brushed past, ignoring the engineer, striding up to the massive device and crouching down at its flank. Curiously intent, she raised one hand and brushed away the accreted layer of static-filled mining dust clinging to its surface. A bright flash of color appeared, a sloppy streak, incongruous.

“Look,” she said, peering closely. “Something’s written here.”

Brusquely, she brushed further along the robot’s housing, revealing a long line of letters in bright splashes of mining marker paint. A single word, in standard Galactic: MOTHERLODE.

There was a silence. The Sarge stood, cigar in hand, staring for a moment in disbelief. “We came here for a goddamn *robot*?”

“Captain, look!” Engineer Gorgo pointed at the insectoids.

A handful of them had parted from the main mass, bearing the pathetic remains of their fallen fellow and laying them on the ground before the robot—the Motherlode. One of them rose on its haunches, and its mandibles and pedipalps buzzed with an indistinct, muffled sound. But, unmistakably, there were words in it, directed at the Motherlode.

“*Repair him*,” they said.

“No way!” exclaimed Del Vayne, looking round at the insect-

toids in alarm. “These little guys are talking, now?”

The Sarge spat, wrinkling his nose. He turned to the insectoid which had just spoken. “Hey, you! Yeah, you, the guy with the feelers. You can understand me?”

The insectoid turned its shrimp-like head towards him. “*Queeg*,” it buzzed.

“*Queeg*?” said Del Vayne. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You are *queeg*,” the voice buzzed again.

“Hang on a minute...” muttered the Sarge, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a set of dog-tags. “I took these off the Old Timer, figured they’d come in useful for something. Didn’t figure it’d be *this*...”

He held up the twin metal disks, each of which projected the holo of a handsome man with a determined yet already grizzled face: The Old Timer, in his younger years. Below the face ran a row of letters and numbers, his ID and name: Gaven Queeg.

The Sarge looked from the dog-tags to the insectoid. He narrowed his eyes, and the way he spoke was like the words held a special meaning. “No, I’m not Queeg. None of us are. Queeg is... well, he’s dead. We’re... we’re his friends...” He trailed off, avoiding the questioning glances from Gorgo and Del Vayne.

“Dead?” The insectoid seemed not to understand.

“Yeah, dead. Like your pal here,” replied the Sarge, gesturing to the smeared remains laid out before the robot.

The insectoid looked at the remains, then made an unmistakable gesture, pointing at the robot. “Dead. Repair dead.”

The Sarge looked at the mining robot. “You want us to repair that? What for, buddy?”

“I don’t think it’s that, Captain,” said the Dolom, a frown still creasing his triple brow as he eyed the Sarge strangely. “I think this creature is expecting the mining robot to repair the creature I accidentally... um... killed.”

“What?” The Sarge was incredulous. “You’re not making any sense, Crewman. Even less than usual. A mining robot’s a mining robot. How the hell’s it gonna ‘repair’ this squished piece of—?” He gestured at the mess on the floor, speechless.

“Captain, that’s not strictly true. For example, the Collective is an association of free-thinking robots—”

“Watch yourself, Gorgo!” warned the Sarge, levelling his cigar. “Robots can’t think! That’s Collective propaganda..”

“Nevertheless,” the Dolom continued, frowning, “there are clearly documented cases of robots within the Collective choosing to acquire new skills exceeding their designated programming and repurposing themselves to new occupations. In short: doing what *they want to do*. Having goals.”

The Sarge looked away in disgust. “Goddamn conspiracy theories..”

“Can you get it working, Gorgo?” Del Vayne eyed the Sarge thoughtfully. “The Old Timer wanted us to protect the Motherlode...” She laid her hand on the chilled metal of the robot’s side. Through her thermal glove, she could feel its cold, hard surface. The nearby insectoids reared on their hindquarters, watching her expectantly with their many waving eyes. The Sarge flicked her a glance, as though she had suddenly seen through to... Was that shame he was hiding?

Slowly, the Dolom examined the Motherlode’s superstructure. “It seems intact. Perhaps its power unit. No, wait. Look here. These burn marks, that looks like blaster damage.” He popped his head up from the far side of the robot’s chassis, and looked at one of the insectoids. “You. What’s your name?”

The insectoid faced the Dolom impassively. “We are Queeg.”

Del Vayne looked away from the Sarge, smiling reflexively. “Looks like the Old Timer had a fan club.” She gazed round at the assembled creatures, looking up at her. “You guys all Queeg, too?”

“Queeg.” “Queeg.” The buzzing sounds came from all over the

assembled swarm, which swayed mournfully from side to side. “Repair.”

“Fascinating,” said the Dolom. “They are clearly intelligent, displaying grief for Queeg’s death. Their communication must be almost instantaneous.”

“They’re like children...” murmured Del Vayne, holding out her hand to one of them, which tickled it gently with probing feelers.

“Goddamn,” cursed the Sarge, shaking his head, forcing his emotions down. “Let’s keep it together, people! Gorgo?”

“Quite, Captain,” replied the Dolom, recollecting himself. He turned to the insectoid, to the Queeg. “The Motherlode has been damaged. Hurt. How did this happen?”

The buzzing was energetic. “From outside. Fire and explosion. Queeg fought. But the Motherlode... she was... hurt. Quiet. Dead. Queeg,” it finished, mournfully.

An attack from outside, which the Old Timer fought off. That explained the battle damage and debris. The Sarge’s thoughts ran back to Gunnarsson in the *Fireamber*, exposed on the surface. And an older memory, of flaming death falling from the sky. He went cold.

“Shit. Queeg destroyed a Sytane Conglomerate prospecting expedition. And it looks like we might be about to lead another one right back again.” He frowned, passing his hand over his brow. But the memories would not wipe away.

“But... Sarge?” began Del Vayne, a concerned expression on her face. “These are just indigenous life forms. Even if Sytane did discover this place, it’s a big rock. It’s practically a planet, and there are bound to be others like it. There isn’t a fight here, Sarge, not any more. Maybe the Old Timer was protecting this robot and these little squishy Queeg guys, but that was his choice. His fight. Not ours.”

The Sarge grimaced, eyeing Del Vayne, and for the first time she saw uncertainty in his eyes. For the first time, the mask of the determined leader, who always had all the answers, slipped.

“Sarge? What are we doing here? What happened to you before you joined the Bulldogs? Why is this important?”

The Sarge winced, and looked at the Dolom. “Engineer, what do you think?”

Gorgo blinked his three eyes, non-plussed. “Captain, whatever you think about robot intelligence, I think it’s clear that Gaven Queeg and the Motherlode have created something unique here. These life forms are intelligent, with their own culture, and Queeg and the Motherlode have been protecting them from an existential threat against which they have no natural defense. If we simply leave things as they currently are, we are dooming the Queeg to genocide and extinction.”

The words acted on the Sarge like an incantation. “Okay,” he breathed, his shoulders sagging with relief. “See if you can get that bucket of bolts back online. Let’s finish what the Old Timer started!”

§ § §

The power surged. Here and there, micro-traceries glowed, blue and gold, embedded deep in the complex polymers of the robot’s superstructure. Delicate, almost like veins, but angular, like chiseled sapphire in a bed of bronze. Slowly, the robot moved.

Engineer Gorgo stepped back, watching the Motherlode warily. He held his breath. To one side, the robot’s excavator drill made a sudden micro-adjustment, matched by a loud clank from its other extremity as a manipulator claw flexed. Del Vayne adjusted her grip on the laser rifle; the Sarge looked round behind him, at the silent swarm of Queeg. Everyone waited.

Slowly, two lambent orbs lit up in the robot’s plain cylindrical head, clustered with sensors. It looked at Gorgo. A couple of seconds passed.

“You are not Gaven Queeg.”

The Dolom began to speak, but the Sarge stepped forward. “We are his friends. I’m sorry. Gaven Queeg is dead.”

“That is a shame.” The robot fell silent for a moment. “I suppose he was very old.”

The Sarge flicked glances at Gorgo and Del Vayne: Do nothing. Let me.

“Yes, he was.”

Slowly, the robot’s head tracked left to right: Gorgo, Del Vayne, the swarm of Queeg, the Sarge. “But then again, I suppose that is the way with organics. The sensation of loss is... curious. I shall miss his company. He was... a friend.”

The Sarge took a step forward, his face suddenly in earnest. “That’s why we’re here. Gaven Queeg asked us to protect you. What was he doing here? What are *you* doing?”

The robot looked away from the Sarge, and gazed out at the Queeg. It gave off a burst of high-pitched chitter and the assembled insectoids began to move forwards. The robot looked down at their slight, fragile bodies, and curved its manipulator arms around them in an unexpectedly human gesture.

“This is what he wanted to protect,” the Motherlode said, looking down at the diminutive aliens brushing around its chassis. “It was their innocence which endeared them to him. The Queeg have no concept of ‘murder,’ no word for ‘lonely,’ countless words for ‘together.’ Gaven Queen found them a strange species. He once told me: Their world seems dull, like a prison, yet they are content. They show no greed, no fear.” The robot gently extricated a couple of Queeg wriggling into its drive tracks. “Perhaps their only failing is that they are a little too attentive...”

The robot’s sapphire eye-lights regarded them. “Gaven Queeg said he wanted to protect them from contamination.”

Before anyone could reply, the comm on the Sarge’s lapel gave a sudden blast of static, making them jump. For a brief moment it cleared into a burst of speech. “...Sarge! ...get the hell out of...!”

The Sarge’s face fell, and he looked at the Motherlode with an expression far different from his usual, stony composure. “Gunnars-

son?” he shouted into the comm. “Is that you? Where the hell are you?”

The static blared, then cleared again. “Main access tunnel!” the pilot shouted, his voice punctuated with running. “Called from the ship... interference... Sarge, they’re here! The Viper’s landed, and—”

A massive explosion screamed over the comm, and even here in the Motherlode’s chamber a distant boom shook the floor, dislodging small fragments from the roof and walls, drifting slowly downwards.

“I fear Gaven Queeg may have failed in his mission,” the Motherlode said, simply.

“Dammit!” The Sarge’s face twisted with anger and frustration. “We brought them here, we’ve gotta stop them! I’m not letting them die this time!” His eyes flashed, meeting Del Vayne’s, and a spark of communication jumped between them.

“Captain, if you drive the Sytane Conglomerate away, they will simply come back with a greater force.” The Dolom stared at him impassively.

“One job at a time! Follow me!” The Sarge hefted his laser rifle and jogged to the chamber exit, calling into the comm. “Gunnarsson, hold on! We’re coming your way!”

§ § §

The Saldrallan howlers sowed chaos among the Queeg. High energy disruptors favored by the Ryjyllian’s snake-like crew, their demoralizing sound was almost as feared as the terrible wounds they tore in organic tissue. Their flashes illuminated the tunnel, filled with a thick blinding fog of blasted debris and vaporized rock, hanging in the air and drifting slowly groundwards in the microgravity.

Gorgo ushered the fleeing Queeg out of harm’s way, before planting his tripod legs in steady stance and dialing his low-recoil energy projector to a short range sonic attack; lasers would dissipate quickly in the refracting debris cloud.

The Sarge looked ahead, dodging to one side as a silhouette

came charging through the fog, resolving itself into Gunnarsson, throwing himself past the Sarge and Del Vayne and collapsing into a roll. Behind him, a large, lithe figure seemed to fly out of the cloud, whirling limbs ending in claws which shone with an intense blue glow. A barrage of intense howler fire came from either side.

As the figure landed, it crouched, baring its teeth and revealing the maned face of the Ryjyllian Captain Ayawr, commander of the Sytane Conglomerate Viper. Her synthetic mesh enviro-suit blazed with clan insignias the Sarge could not place.

“That was good piloting, Arsubaran,” she hissed. “Perhaps I was wrong to suggest you weren’t worthy of the *Fireamber*. But you didn’t evade us for long!” She assumed a ready stance, bringing her arms up before her in one of the uncanny gestures of *Weyw-Skreel*, the lethal Ryjyllian martial art. Each paw flickered with the lambent blue of high-discharge vibroclaws. Then she attacked.

Slow mo. To one side, Del Vayne throws her laser rifle to the ground, pulling the Old ‘65 Penetrator Classic from its holster and firing its massive rounds into the cloud in the direction of the Saldrallan howler fire, staggering backwards with the low-grav recoil. To the other, the Dolom rushes into the fog with surprising speed for his bulk; before him, the hooded snakelike head of one of the Ryjyllian’s Saldrallan crew rears up, its disruptor rifle blazing. Gunnarsson, scrambling to his feet, sees the danger, but too late. The disruptor bolt sears into Gorgo’s third arm; in the low-pressure atmosphere, the Dolom’s scream seems muffled, distant, as the air turns opaque with the spray of blood.

Gunnarsson runs forwards, lifting his laser rifle, which lances through the fog, its beam diffracting uselessly. The Sarge dives. As he does so, he draws his backup Armadyne Hi-Threat Aggressor Pistol and pumps a spray of wide-angled blaster bolts towards the Ryjyllian. But she is not there; already, she is beneath his defenses, bending almost unbelievably into a spitting sinuous blur, recklessly fast, as the vibroclaw sears into the Sarge’s thigh. He drops, grunting with

the pain, but bringing his pistol to bear.

A whoop from the left. Del Vayne empties the clip of the Old '65 into the head of the snakelike Saldrallan she finds clutching the disruptor rifle in the fog. The intense recoil kicks her off-balance, sending several bullets wide, but it is enough. Elated, she twists to see Gorgo go down in a second barrage of disruptor fire. Neither she nor Gunnarsson are going to get there in time.

At the rear, a looming mechanical chassis clanks through the ranks of the wavering Queeg, its tracks pulling it forward. The Motherlode. With a loud screeching and clanging it pivots in place, bringing its aft mining tool to bear: a gravity hammer.

There is a THOOM! and the air goes from everyone's lungs. The Saldrallan standing over the already wounded Gorgo, lowering its howling disruptor for the coup de grace, explodes into a two-dimensional smear of blood, flesh, and cartilage, before being precipitated backwards and out of sight at several thousand kilometers an hour. The gravity hammer switches off.

Heartbeat.

Ryjyllian Captain Ayawr looked down at the supine Sarge, her vibroclaws ready, staring down the barrel of the hi-threat aggressor.

"Give it up, Captain Ayawr," grunted the Sarge, wincing at the vibroclaw wound in his leg. "You're outnumbered."

"But I'm fast, too, Arsubaran," the Ryjyllian hissed. "Why shouldn't I take you with me?"

"We're not murderers. Surrender. Look what's going on here, Ayawr. What are you doing working for these goddamn snakes, anyhow? Where's the honor in that?"

"All work is honorable."

With the recoil damage to his shoulder, the Sarge's grip on the blaster pistol began to tremble. "Bullshit. Look at these little guys. This is their home. They ain't like us. They don't *get* fighting, violence, killing. It's not in their nature. Can you imagine that? Just go,

goddammit! You gotta leave them be. We all do.”

The Ryjyllian stared at the Sarge, as though facing an impossible choice. “I have given my word I would return the coordinates of this ore deposit to the Sytane Conglomerate, or die trying. I will not break that word.”

The Sarge gnashed his teeth. “Dammit, why the hell are you Ryjyllians always so goddamned literal?”

Captain Ayawr blinked inscrutably, still holding her vibroclaws poised to strike. “One thing I do not understand. You... mercenaries... are defending these innocents against the Conglomerate? Why would you do such a thing?”

On the ground, the Sarge grimaced. “It’s for a dead friend. Lots of dead friends. I made a promise, and I’m here to keep it. *Or die trying.*”

The Ryjyllian seemed taken aback. “I had not realized your species held such things as important.”

“Yeah, we’re full of surprises.”

The Ryjyllian looked around her. At Del Vayne, Gunnarsson, Gorgo hunched over in pain. At the Motherlode and its gravity hammer pointing at her. At the Queeg, milling around the robot like children around a mother’s skirts. The web of duty and honor, binding the Bulldogs and the Motherlode together in defense of the Queeg.

“Look after the *Fireamber*, Captain. I thought first it was an abomination to have her in the hands of aliens, but I see you are a worthy crew. You have reminded me of the value of honor.”

The Sarge looked alarmed. “What the hell? Don’t you—”

But the Ryjyllian was already striking, her brilliant blue vibroclaws scything towards his face, lightning fast.

But not fast enough.

Whether it was the Aggressor pistol or the gravity hammer which hit first was difficult to say. Whichever it was, the Ryjyllian’s death was instantaneous. The hammer flung Captain Ayawr’s blood-

ied body from a standing start to orbital velocity in a fraction of a second, leaving nothing but the searing blue streaks of five vibro-claws glaring across the Sarge's retinas. Already, they began to fade.

In the sudden stillness Del Vayne looked around her. The threat was gone. Recollecting herself, she crouched down next to the Sarge and gently applied a gel patch to his wound, steadying her breathing. Somewhere to the side she heard Gunnarsson laugh with relief, joking as he began to give first aid to the fallen Dolom. Slowly, the Queeg approached, touching, testing, reassuring themselves their protectors were alive.

Instinctively, Del Vayne smiled at them, and at the approaching Motherlode. Then her expression became thoughtful, and she turned to the Sarge.

“Why did she do that, Sarge?”

The Sarge stared into the empty space the Ryjyllian had occupied only moments before. “Only way she could keep her word, kid. Seize this ball of rock for the Conglomerate, or die trying. Guess she finally made up her mind whose side she was on.”

§ § §

Del Vayne watched the Queeg clustering around the wounded Gorgo as he limped aboard the *Fireamber*. Around her, the swarms of the diminutive insectoids swayed to and fro with deep emotion.

“That's the first time I've ever fought *against* the corporation, Sarge. I'm still not sure how I feel.”

The Sarge's eyes played over her features, as if trying to memorize every detail. The flush of exertion still on her cheeks; her barely-parted lips; the tiny frown creasing her otherwise perfect forehead. “It wasn't against the corp, kid,” he sighed. “It was for the Bulldogs. The Old Timer made a promise, took these... people... under his wing. That ain't cotton-grass, kid. That's a responsibility. And we Bulldogs stick to our own.” He met her eyes briefly, then looked away.

She looked at the Motherlode and the Queeg behind the Sarge,

gathered to say farewell. Then at the Sarge again, the realization dawning.

“You’re not coming with us.”

“No, I’m not, kid. The Old Timer’s job isn’t done yet.”

She stared at him, her gaze drilling deep. “I may be a kid, Sarge, but don’t bullshit me. I know you wake up shouting in the night. Everyone knows. What happened to you during the Kadrassi Succession War, Sarge? What has this all been about?”

Anger and denial flared briefly in the Sarge’s eyes, but then the fire went out, and his shoulders sagged.

“It was near the end of the War. My platoon was on the Mardizi homeworld when the Kadrassi Succession Fleet attacked. We came under heavy fire defending a Mardizi settlement. Orbital bombardment. Mardizi panicking, running everywhere. I... I saw a group trapped in a hospital compound. We went in, just as the Kadrassi fighters attacked. I must have been knocked out in the first wave. When I came to, there was no one else alive. No Mardizi, none of my platoon. No one.”

The Sarge’s eyes were hot and red at the recollection, his voice dry and sticking in his throat. His face looked empty.

“So now you want to throw your life away to make up for it? You screwed up, Sarge. A miscalculation, a bad decision. It happens!”

The Sarge stared at her, the weight of dread and guilt he’d lived with all these years bearing down on him. He shook his head, bitterly.

A defiant light came into Del Vayne’s eyes. “This is not the same. We’re not abandoning the Queeg! We’ll report the Queeg presence to the First Contact authorities at Galactic Central Point. There’ll be a diplomatic mission, trade. Maybe the Queeg will even do their own mining! They’ll be protected from Sytane...”

“The Old Timer wanted to protect the Queeg from contamination...”

“Hell, Sarge, you can’t take on the whole galaxy! What’s done is done. The Queeg have been discovered, they’re part of the Frontier now. Let them decide!”

“They need—”

“Dammit, Sarge!” she interrupted. “Never mind what *they* need. *They* can manage, they’ve got the Motherlode. What about us? We need you! *I need you!* I’ve just got off that goddamn rock they brought me up on, and you’re the best thing...” She broke off, her eyes suddenly glistening. “Stop fighting it, Sarge. Don’t throw it all away. Everything’s just beginning...”

As he stood there, something moved inside the Sarge. Something huge, seismic, shifting. A weight seemed poised to slough off his shoulders.

“TransGalaxy will have my ass for this,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. “Never mind what Sytane will do. I could do time...”

“I’ll wait,” Del Vayne said, decisively. “We all will. Whaddya say, Sarge? Come back with us? Show us what the galaxy’s about?”

The Sarge laughed to himself, shaking his head, and threw the ragged old cigar butt on the floor. He took a new one out of his top pocket and lit it, puffing out clouds of smoke. He looked at her.

“Lemme think about it,” he said with a smile.

About Sarah Newton

Sarah Newton is a writer of science-fiction and fantasy roleplaying games and fiction, including: Mindjammer, the far future transhuman novel and setting for the FATE 3 roleplaying system (Mindjammer Press); The Chronicles of Future Earth, the science-fantasy setting for Chaosium's Basic Roleplaying; the "Zero Point" campaign for Achtung! Cthulhu (Modiphius); the "Great Game" campaign for Leagues of Adventure (Triple Ace Games); and co-author of the Legends of Anglerre, FATE-based fantasy roleplaying game. Sarah lives in rural France with her legendarily patient husband The Brown Dirt Cowboy, with an out-of-tune piano and numerous farmyard animals.

A Fist Full of Urseminites

by Jared Axelrod

“Your head is the only one that works, Chubbs,” Merisja said. Her voice was tender, but she wasn’t looking at him. “It’s got to be you. Your first duty is to the ship. Hanberno jingle cue banana patch.”

Chubbs looked down at Merisja. Her neural pathways had to degraded down to the point that her arms and legs were useless, twitching and jittering at her sides like a injured insect. The right side of her face had fallen, sad and numb, while the other shuddered and twisted in a rictus grin. A previous spasm had ripped her space suit, and Chubbs could see the results of her uncontrolled bowels leaking onto the ship’s floor.

“I can’t do this, Boss,” Chubbs said. He nervously scratched at the thick fur on his head, recently shaped and dyed into a purple mohawk. He didn’t like seeing Merisja like this, reduced to less than an infant. She was Captain, wasn’t she? She shouldn’t be on the floor, tangled in a ball of her own limbs. “I’m just an Urseminite.”

“A fist full of Urseminites can climb Mohabadda’s shoulder,” Marisja said. “You the Boss, now. You the Boss. Teddy bears can’t be harmed due to picnic foods and fluffy heads. Bears, bears of very little brain. Gimmie seltzer whinge eang zam. Zam... zam zum zubbs. Chubbs zubbs, Chubbs...cap...tin. “ Her eyes stopped focusing, and her heavy breathing shuddered. Her autonomic processes were shutting down, just like the rest of the crew. The entire crew of the Trans-Galaxy fleet ship *Sanders*.

The entire crew, save for Chubbs. Who, if he chose to believe the final words of his Commanding Officer, was now captain of the *Sanders*. A ship, it should be noted, that was in very real danger of crashing into Tevorla IV. Tevorla IV was populated in ways *Sanders* no longer was, though not for too much longer. Unless Chubbs could get the engine started.

Which was his responsibility as captain, after all. First duty to the ship.

Chubbs gave Marisja one last look, her crumpled body no longer twitching, no longer alien. She seemed at peace, at least. Poor Swatchco had died frozen in an agonizing silent scream, but Marisja was spared that at least.

“Rank has its privileges,” Chubbs said to himself. Chubbs ran his paws over his mohawk, adjusted his toolbelt and walked out the door on his stubby legs toward the engine room.

§ § §

Going to the engine room meant going through the cargo hold. That wasn't saying much, most of *Sanders* was cargo hold. Chubbs, as a loader, spent most of his time there. But it was different now. All the bustle and noise that echoed in the wide space was absent. The inside of *Sanders* was as quiet as the vacuum outside of it, and felt just as welcoming.

The first thing Chubbs noticed in the cargo hold was that the neurotoxin was still there. It hung in midair, a toxic cloud five feet off the ground. It had slowly leaked through the entire ship. But it was first released in the cargo hold, and in the cargo hold was where most of it remained. The floating toxin made a sickly pale ceiling to Chubb's eyes, turning the huge hold into mockingly small room. The ship was now Chubb-sized.

Chubbs wasted no time going through the hold, trying his best not to look at the contorted corpses of his former crewmates. Fernson's spine looked nearly broken, it bent back so far. Hrggggnur's arms were wrapped around his head, the elbows bending the wrong way. Xringotch looked as if something had slammed him into the hold's floor, his gelatinous body flat and thin. Jimmy would be around here somewhere, his green face gone, but Chubbs didn't want to see him again. There was enough horror in the hold that Chubbs didn't have to go looking for it. Amidst this jungle of broken bodies and jagged

limbs, the ziggurat stood tall, poking into the layer of smog: point zero for the toxin.

Jimmy had tried to use his “trademark jiggy-pokery,” as he called it, to see what was inside the strange-looking canister. He got his face burned off for his trouble, as a rush of the neurotoxin came out all at once. The pyramid-shaped vessel was designed not to be tampered with. With the results of its contents all over the ship, why such extreme measures were taken was clear. The locks that Jimmy could not leave alone were not to keep people out, as he thought. They were keep death in.

“I don’t know how I’m going to get rid of you.” Chubbs put his furry paw up against the sloped side of the canister, to remind himself this was real, that it needed to be taken care of. Even if he got the engine running, he would still have a ship filled with a deadly gas. But that was moot, if *Sanders* crashed into Tevorla IV. Chubbs shook his head to bring himself back to the present, “Prioritize, son. Prioritize,” he mumbled to himself.

The engine room was just as cold as the cargo hold, the massive hulk that kept the *Sanders* going frozen in place. Chubbs was worried he’d have to hunt for what had locked up the engine, but he needn’t have worried. Ongranro’s corpse was caught between two gargantuan gears, the metal straining to grind through the bulky engineer’s body.

Chubbs gritted his teeth and set about prying Ongranro loose from the machine with an errant crowbar. It was rough going—Ongranro’s three arms were making it particularly difficult—but the steel teeth finally released their quarry. The gears turned once more, and the engine burned with movement and purpose. The room was full of noises: the clatter of pistons, the whine of wheels, the rumble of fuel being burned. But the din was pierced by the rattle and screech of the intercom.

“Who’s down there? Who’s the fox in the engine room? Who are you when you’re home, fox? You best turn that engine off, quick as

you please. Me an' this ship's got a date with destiny. Hate to have to get my rifle and go fox hunting." The voice through the speaker was rough and crackly, and the final sound in "fox" dissolved into loose "s"s, but Chubbs recognized it well enough. Jimmy's voice was always easy to pick out.

Chubbs took the intercom in his rough paw, and hesitantly pressed the button. "This is the Captain. If you're in the cockpit, Jimmy, steer us away from Tevorla IV." He tried to sound tough, confident. Like Merisja would. Like a Captain.

"No, I don't think I'm going to do that," Jimmy said. "No, fox, I'm gonna keep the steering set on Tevorla IV. I think that's what needs to happen." There was a coughing fit on the other side of speaker, and sound of something hard being spit out and clattering against the metal floor.

"You're sick, Jimmy. You're..." Chubbs struggled for the words. What could he possibly say? "You're not well."

"And you're not Merisja. Is she dead? Who's next in command? Ongranro? No, no, you're not him, either. What's your name, fox? Who are you when you're at home?"

"Jimmy, turn the ship around. That's an order!" Chubbs growled his "r"s in the hope it sounded more menacing. Instead, laughter poured out of the intercom's grate.

"Oh, man. Is that you, Chubbs? Would've never guessed! Never in a million ages. You're the fox. Who would have thought. You're the fox."

"Turn the ship around. We have to fix this."

"Don't you see? That's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to fix it. I have a theory, that the moment before we crash, we'll experience euphoric altered awareness. Adrenaline, dopamine, dimethyltrip-tamine..." Jimmy trailed off. "You know I can't feel my face anymore? I wonder if I ever did."

"You're going to kill everyone who lives in Tevorla IV so you can get high on your own supply?" Chubbs could not believe what

he was hearing.

“It’s the great cosmic joke, fox. We were born to die. I felt it, right when I got a face full of that gas.”

“Jimmy. Jimmy, listen to me. That gas was a neurotoxin. It’ll kill you...”

“But it hasn’t. It hasn’t killed me. And it hasn’t killed you. We’re special, Fox. Who’s to say the crash will kill us? Maybe we’re gods, and we’ve never known it. What a sad thought.”

Chubbs breathed hard out of his nostrils. “Impact into a planet from space is different than a chemical weapon designed with a particular species in mind.”

“You’re only saying that because someone else told it to you,” Jimmy said, his voice static and bored. And, something else. He sounded...hurt. “You’ve only experienced one. How can you say it’s not like the other? How can you deny the sensory possibilities I’m offering you? I thought we were friends.”

“I can’t let you crash the ship,” Chubbs said.

“Because you’re Captain, now? Izzat it?”

“Because I’m Captain now. I fly under the name *Sanders*...”

“You’ll DIE under the name *Sanders*, Chubbs. You wanna be a fox, huh? That’s what you want? Fine. A fox you’ll be. And I’ll be a fox hunter.” With that, the intercom went dead.

Chubbs looked at the intercom in his paw and scrunched his brow tight. He threw it angrily at the wall, only to dodge, surprised when it snapped back on its coiled cord. Chubbs picked the intercom up again, and dangled it by its cord.

“This either the worst idea I’ve ever had, or the best,” Chubbs thought. “And I’ve got no time for a better one.”

§ § §

Jimmy entered the cargo hold bent over his rifle, ready to fire. But Jimmy was not a tall man—though he had a good two feet on

Chubbs—and bending his torso like that put his face up against the poison cloud. What was left of Jimmy’s nasal passages was burned by the fumes, and he wrenched his face up.

“You there, Fox? Heeerrrrreee, foxy-foxy.” Jimmy called out into the hold. The chest-high cloud made him feel like he was sunken into the floor. It also made the hold look far emptier than he knew it was. The blanket of toxin made the corpses and cargo disappear.

“I’m here,” Chubbs said. But his voice was distorted. It took Jimmy a minute to realize that he was hearing Chubbs voice over the hold’s intercom.

“Trying to confuse me with the speaker system. You are a clever fox, aren’t you?” Jimmy kept whirling around, disturbing the smoothness of the toxic cover. “It won’t work. It won—”

Jimmy didn’t get to finish his thought. A hard piece of metal impacted with this right shin so hard he heard a crack, and he crumpled to the ground. There, in the dim light afforded by the cloud, he saw the broken bodies of his crewmates. And Chubbs, in a full space-suit, holding a crowbar.

Small, furry Chubbs looked so ridiculous in the layers of glass and mylar that Jimmy couldn’t help but laugh. “What you gonna do, you little Urseminite?”

“A fist full of Urseminites can climb Mohabadda’s shoulder,” Chubbs said. The voice was coming from a speaker behind Jimmy, and he made the mistake of turning his head back, surprised. Chubbs wasted no time clocking Jimmy upside his head.

Chubbs’s crowbar slammed in hard, and scraped the raw, viridian muscle that was all Jimmy had left for a face. He did it a second time, knocking loose some of Jimmy’s exposed teeth. Confident that Jimmy was down, Chubbs ran to the cargo hold’s main loading door.

It was the klaxon that brought Jimmy back to the world. The blasting alarm that let everyone know the pressure was about to change in the hold. He shook himself awake, and tried to stand, but his body refused to find any balance. Crawling on the ground un-

derneath the toxin cloud, he managed to find his rifle, and get a bead on Chubbs.

Through his scope, Jimmy could see Chubbs, his gloved paw on the massive lever by the loading door. Though he was struggling to wear the pants of a captain, Chubbs was still a loader as far the ship's computer was concerned. And as a loader, Chubbs didn't have much security clearance on *Sanders*. Realistically, he could only do one thing: open the bay doors.

"You are the fox, aren't you," Jimmy said.

"No," Chubbs said. "I'm the Boss. Goodbye, Jimmy."

Chubbs yanked down the lever, threw all of his tiny body against it. The slow grinding of the massive metal doors added a baseline to the cacophony of the klaxon, but was quickly drowned out by the air blowing out the increasing opening. Jimmy watched the cloud above his head being blown out into space. He was about to say something clever, but the air was stronger than he was, and it lifted Jimmy off the floor and sent him hurtling to the darkness of space, chasing after the remains of the crew, a few empty crates, and the triangular container that had started it all.

Chubbs was also caught in the wind escaping the ship, but had the foresight to tether himself to the wall. Paw over paw, he pulled himself back down the chain, until he was back to the door controls. Once the hold doors were closed, Chubbs allowed himself a short breath of relief.

§ § §

"And then you righted the ship, and brought it here?" the Class D dispatcher wasn't looking at Chubbs, she was looking at his log. "All crew was lost?"

"It says that in the report," Chubbs said. He was having trouble sitting in the chair across from the dispatcher's desk. It was made for someone at least two feet taller, and Chubb's legs dangled over the seat.

“I realize that,” the dispatcher said. “And you’re a loader, correct?”

“Captain,” Chubbs said.

“As it stands, it is not customary to promote loaders to command detail with no stops in between.”

“It was Captain Merisja’s decision that I take command.”

“While under the influence of a neurotoxin,” the dispatcher said. She looked back down at her report. “Still, you got *Sanders* back in one piece, and that’s more than most captains are capable of. And your record is stellar. Captain Merisja even recommends you for command duty, here.”

“She said that?” Despite himself, Chubbs was surprised.

“She sure did.” The dispatcher looked down at her reports and shrugged. “What the hell. We can always demote you if you screw up. You’ve got a good head on you, Captain Chubbs. That may be all it takes.”

“Thank you,” Chubbs said. “You won’t regret it.”

“But you may,” the dispatcher said, gathering all her reports into one pile. “Being a captain is big job, and I can’t help but notice those fuzzy shoulders on you are awfully small.”

“A fist full of Urseminites can climb Mohabadda’s shoulder,” Chubbs said, hopping off the chair. The dispatcher’s face begged for an explanation, but Chubbs gave her none. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a Captain’s jacket that needs tailoring.”

About Jared Axelrod

Jared Axelrod is an author, an illustrator, a graphic designer, a sculptor, a costume designer, a podcaster and quite a few other things that he's lost track of but will no doubt remember when the situation calls for it. He is a founding member of the daily flash-fiction website 365 TOMORROWS, and the writer and producer of two science-fiction podcasts, "The Voice Of Free Planet X" and the serial "Aliens You Will Meet." He is the author of The Battle of Blood and Ink, a graphic novel. He is not domestic, he is a luxury, and in that sense, necessary.

Being Green

by Peter Woodworth

A career in adult entertainment gives you a surprisingly diverse skill set.

I know some of you immediately turned up your noses, or whatever organ you sniff with, as soon as I used the term “adult entertainment.” That’s OK—I’m used to people making assumptions about me. It’s one of the downsides of being super ultra famous, and especially for earning that notoriety in a field that makes some people furious, most people curious, and almost everyone just a little bit jealous.

You probably already recognized me: Kinky Slam, the Green Machine, inventor of the infamous Slammer Hammer™—a patented coital position termed “mind-numbingly obscene” by the Templar Decency Council and still considered an excommunicable offense by six major religions—and quite possibly the most famous Ken Reeg in the whole Frontier Zone. Males, females, beings of mixed or indeterminate or indifferent gender, let’s just say I romanced them all... and not just for the cameras, if you catch my drift. I made more films and raked in more credits than any adult star since Hob the Tripod hung up his three-legged pants. Even for a species that doesn’t sleep, I was legendary for my drive, and for six solid years it looked like it would all pay off.

At least, it did right up until the marathon “Spire Slammin’ Live!” show on the Obscenity Spire. I’m sure you’ve seen it—it was the fastest selling holostream in the proud nine hundred year history of Punctum Galaxias Pictures. What’s that? All right, fine, I’m sure you just saw the part that ruined my career. Sure. I believe you.

Anyway, I knew I never should have gone into the Room Without Memory. For starters, it’s a load of crap—the Spire staff knows exactly what’s going on in there, and you better believe we weren’t

the only ones recording it. And I don't care how much sense fog they pump into that place, I really should've had my legend checker scan the occupants before I, well, you know, said hello to them. In theory that was the whole point of the scene, "It could be ANYONE in there! Let's go see what Kinky finds!" I think the voice over bot said, and instead of being cautious I let my reputation and my faith in immuno-boosters get the best of me. And boy, did they ever.

You know the scene. The soundtrack's going, they're looping some pre-recorded catch phrase of mine over the action as the camera starts to sift through the sense fog and focus, then all of a sudden it's just me and four nimble Ryjyllians, a big male and three smaller females. We don't quite notice the camera at first, but then you hear the whir of the holofeeder uploading, and all of a sudden everything stops, and slowly—oh so very slowly, in both my memory and on film—five faces look up to see the camera. I'm smiling only because I'm still a few seconds away from learning that the big one is Grawl awp Brrawl awp Yrrll, also known as Warlord Blood Howl, undisputed master of the Felix Majora cluster and wanted by Templar and Saldrallan governments alike for crimes too numerous and terrible to discuss.

Alerting his enemies to his whereabouts would be bad enough, but on top of it the galactic viewing public is also getting a clear, energetic, fully three dimensional idea of what makes Blood Howl purr and... well, I'm sure you saw it. Suffice it to say he wasn't exactly positioned where you'd expect him to be in the Slammer Hammer™ and leave it at that. I only managed to escape because he was too busy mauling the camera operator. Not that my problems ended with escaping the Spire two steps ahead of a naked, rampaging felinomorphic; trust me when I tell you that having two galactic governments and one pissed off warlord out gunning for you is not nearly as romantic as the adventure holostreams might make it seem.

I might have managed to avoid a career move to galactic shipping if I hadn't been quite so trusting with Honey Twist, my business

manager. As soon as word got out that Blood Howl was out for, well, blood, Honey urged me to sign over my accounts to make it harder for Blood Howl's hunters to trace me. I know, I know, but in my defense I was bit more concerned about being disemboweled and tossed out an airlock. Also, I probably should've figured that no one is really that understanding about their twin sister. In retrospect, it was perfectly obvious what would happen as soon as I signed those accounts over to Honey, but it was quite a shock back then. I hope her production company was worth it, though judging by their first few pictures... eh.

Still, when I see a nice chilled flask of the Shallish icewine that I used to love behind the bar and I have trouble scraping together enough for a lukewarm pitcher of Dregg™, or I have to take a loan off Haaken just to get my uniform cleaned at a place that won't destroy it, I find myself wishing I'd focused more on finances a bit more back when I was flush. Toss in the fact that what little Honey didn't get goes toward the ongoing project of keeping my current identity and whereabouts hidden, and it really sinks in. Even for this rather pathetic pay grade, well, I'm scraping.

Which all adds up to explain how I left the world of adult entertainment, joined the decidedly unsexy world of Class D freight, where I eventually found myself on an asteroid in the middle of nowhere, hanging upside down in the kitchen of a rundown slop shop, listening to a Saldrallan and his—her? its? always so hard to say with those guys—little Urseminite girlfriend try to figure out which pieces of me they wanted to take off first. Because that's exactly how far I've fallen these days, I'm easy pickings for two of the dumbest wannabe comedian bounty hunters in the galaxy.

“Remind me again, my sssweet little Ssssnnack,” says the Saldrallan, tongue flicking as it holds up a long, hooked blade. Balancing forward on its serpentine body, it pushes the point against my chest, not hard enough to draw blood, but just enough to set me swaying on the hooks. “Which organssss can you mammalsss live without?”

With its free hand, it reaches down and ruffles the Urseminite's fur affectionately. They've been like that ever since I regained consciousness; I don't know if it's something they always do, or whether the love play is a nod to my former occupation, but either way it was a bit much, even by my standards.

"I dunno, Sassless," laughs the stubby little Urseminite, nuzzling the Saldrallan's hand while puffing on her second cheap cigar inside of ten minutes. Her beady little eyes are just about my height in this position, and all I can see there is pure ill will. Her voice is high and impossible sweet. "When it comes to that sort of thing, *I'm a little fuzzy!*"

That strikes them both as the funniest thing they've ever heard, Sassless hissing and rasping, Snack making those barking sounds that pass for Urseminite amusement, while all I can do is force a small smile and hang there, wondering if I really set myself up for these two idiots to kill me.

§ § §

Sorry, sorry, I rushed it. Let me spool back the timeline for a moment.

I didn't just walk into this nasty bit of business, not by a long shot. No, the trouble started last night cycle on this miserable hollowed-out rock, when I was out making some doorstep deliveries. The *Wounded Pride* had arrived ahead of schedule, for once, and at our last stop at the Orbit 9 outpost we'd taken on some old-fashioned last-class hand mail. Most of it had been languishing there for weeks in local time, if not months, but as we were the first Class D that bothered to stop by since it started piling up, we got the honor of carrying the quarter ton of overdue miscellanea to its intended recipients.

It's not bad work on its own, really. You get to go out and see actual customers face to face, rather than the boring, backbreaking bulk loading and unloading that normally takes up most of a crew's

time on a freight hauler. I didn't have high hopes when I signed up for Class D freighter service, and even so I was quickly disappointed. I'm a people person—go figure, right?—but that isn't exactly what TransGalaxy looks for in a new hire. Fortunately, capacity to get along well with all types of strangers on short notice is one thing you pick up quickly in the adult entertainment business, so at least the endless crew shuffling and port hopping wasn't too much of a strain. Actually, the hardest part was staying incognito.

Nobody wants to hear the famous complain about being famous, but it really does have some serious downsides, particularly when you're trying to stay a few steps ahead of a violent end as an oversized chew toy. Luckily it's balanced somewhat by the fact people don't tend to pay too much attention to us Class D stiff—when you're doing the galaxy's boring grunt work, you don't usually merit more than a curt greeting or cursory glance—and the bars we frequent tend to be fairly disreputable too, dark affairs at the far edge of the local environmental controls, always a little too hot or too cold, sometimes even a little gravity light if the place is really cheap.

Every once in a while, though, I still get the *look*. It usually takes them a moment—after all, given my previous career I'm not exactly high on the list of “people it's OK to admit you know”—but there's that flicker of recognition, usually followed by a lewd smile or heavy wink. At first I was afraid that every time I was recognized some bounty hunter would blast out of the woodwork and start shooting, but it turns out that I still have quite a few fans out there. Or maybe it's just that not everyone believes my bounty is for real. I personally didn't think “sextillion” was a real number; I thought Blood Howl was just making fun of my old job. And anyway, how could he still offer so much cash after half of his systems rebelled? All the same, I try to stay moving, fans or no fans.

Which is why after dropping off the package—a likely quite dated “Congratulations on your anniversary!” message scrawled on the side in delicate script—I should have kept right on walking when the

voice called out behind me: “Kinky? Is that you?” Instead I stopped. According to the crew roster I’m Rudy Shine, but getting a new name in a computer system is a lot easier than breaking the habit of answering to your old one. I pulled my hat down and started walking again, but it was too late. I’d been made.

“I thought that it was you!” A bubbly young Arsubaran girl with two green streaks in her long orange hair took hold of my arm, turned me around to face her. When I looked up from under the brim of my delivery cap, she positively squealed with delight, clapping her hands under her chin. “Oh. My. Stars! You’re so famous! I love your stuff!”

“Uh, thanks.” I gave her a placating smile. After a few bad scenes early on, I learned that denial only tended to make people louder and more insistent, so I’ve learned instead to admit it, sign an autograph if they want and move on as fast as possible. I looked around, but the only other thing I saw in the habitation tunnel was a Tetsuashan doing maintenance on a leaking panel. At least I didn’t have to worry about this girl hiding a raygun in that outfit. It looked pleasantly skintight.

“Always nice to meet a fan! Look, would you like an autograph or something?” I tapped the TransGalaxy patch on my jacket. “I hate to be rude, but I’m on a schedule, you know?” Which wasn’t exactly true. That package had been my last delivery, and Captain Vaan wouldn’t be expecting me back aboard until halfway through the next day cycle. The *Wounded Pride* was being fumigated with xenocidal agents on account of the strange rash Haaken had developed when we carried those pet slors from the Gohzeria Cluster.

“I’m not looking for an autograph,” the girl purred, stepping up close. At that range she smelled like crushed flowers and sweet candy. “But I could think of a few uses for that delivery outfit.” She put on a pouty actress voice. “Oh, my, what kind of delivery is that? It looks so *big* and *dangerous*.”

“Very cute.” It was an effort not to roll my eyes. She didn’t lack

enthusiasm or a body to display it, but it was a routine I'd heard more times than I cared to count. "I wish I could, I really do, but unfortunately—"

"I can pay." Suddenly the pout was gone, and she was all business. "Just for a little private feature, you and me? Come on, if you're everything I've seen I won't last long, and you can get back to your ship, no one will ever know." I held up a hand, but she quoted a number at me. Not too long ago it wouldn't have been enough to make me do my hair, let alone agree to a private feature, but now it was almost two months' extra pay. Two whole months without scraping by, maybe a few nights ordering something like the drinks I'd used to enjoy, or get a room with an actual bed that isn't just a slab freshly sanitized from its last occupant. My hand wavered, and she had me. She knew it too, and with a little giggle of triumph she led me by the hand to her little door.

"We need to go over a few ground rules," I started as she pulled me inside. Her lips were at my ear, promising things like I hadn't known in quite a while, but when I finally found the light activator panel the room was totally empty. I had just enough time to wonder what that meant when I felt a little pinch in my lower back and everything went all wobbly. Turns out she'd been hiding something after all, but who expected needles? The last thing I remember was her looking down at me with a slight smile. I think she might have said "You're worth a lot more than a private feature," but maybe that was just my perception going dark.

Did I mention how scary getting knocked out is for a species that doesn't sleep?

§ § §

So, back to the hook, just a few moments before the part where they started talking about cutting me up for fun and profit. Like I said, one advantage of working in adult entertainment is that I'm not too hindered by hanging upside down, even with my feet bound to

hooks. Actually, I'm quite comfortable in quite a few unusual body configurations, but I'll leave that to my back catalog. So while most people would be feeling sick or panicky or blacking out, I just took in the surroundings, turning them right side up as I went. Metal counters and cookers, plain and not particularly clean; several clear containers with substances of various colors, probably vat food they reshaped for serving; a row of nice sharp implements on the far wall, comfortably out of reach.

Oh, and Sassless and Snack, of course, whose names I quickly gathered due to their fondness for repeating them incessantly to each other. And the Arsubaran girl, who'd apparently delivered me to them. I caught part of their conversation as I'd faded back into consciousness.

"I told you he'd fall for it." That was the Arsubaran girl, let's call her Orange Candy. "And here he is!" She sounded like a child showing off a prize picture to a parent.

"Yesss, yesss, very clever," said Sassless impatiently. I gathered she'd been leading them on for a while before the big reveal. "We have your cut, as agreed upon. Snack, hand over her share."

"A little more than she deserves, Sassless," Snack chided lightly.

I actually didn't see the split, but I heard Orange Candy curse. "What is this? This isn't even half what we agreed on!" That pouting tone was back, and surprisingly disturbing in a criminal context. "I want the rest now!"

"Take what you get and like it, sweetie," said Snack, voice dripping honey.

"Easy, Sssnack. No need to get all hot-blooded about it." The two bounty hunters shared a laugh. "But my associate isss correct—we agreed on a third of the bounty. We're giving you half of your ssshare now, and half when it isss paid."

"That wasn't the deal!" I swear it sounded like Orange Candy stomped her foot. "Getting him to Blood Howl is your problem, not mine. How do I know you won't just skip out on the rest when you

get your share?”

There was the unmistakable sound of a laser charging up. I wish I hadn't come to be as familiar with it, but let's just say Class D bars are as classy as they come. “Guesss you'll just have to trussst usss, sssweetling. Go.”

Boots stomped to an unseen door, but right before it closed I heard Orange Candy call out petulantly: “I'm telling Slow Samus about this!” The name didn't mean anything to me, but then again, I wasn't a native of the Xen-Sha asteroid belt. Didn't mean anything to my two new friends either, judging by how they chuckled at her departure, which turned out to be quite a shame for both of them. Around that time they noticed I was awake, though, and began the lovely conversation about removing my body parts I started earlier. The rest of it went something like this:

“What doessss the bounty ssspecify?” Sassless said, tapping the blade on my waist. “I don't want to do sssso much we lossse out on our payday.”

“Just alive, that's all,” Snack said. She kept staring at me, puffing on that awful cigar. “You're awfully calm, Kinky. Figured you for the begging type, or at least a crier.” She blew smoke in face. “Blood Howl wants your head, ain't you scared?”

“Not really,” I said, with a bit more calm than I felt. Truth was, I kept expecting fear, but it just wasn't coming. Maybe that would change when they actually started cutting, or when I got shoved through Blood Howl's airlock, but until then it honestly wasn't too bad. Another perk of the adult entertainment business is that you get good at handling worry—when your future occasionally depends on test results that won't be back for a few weeks, you either fall to pieces and quit or learn to manage worry. “Do you have to be so dramatic, though?”

It's not easy for a Saldrallan to shrug, but Sassless managed. “If we don't enjoy our work, what good isss it?” Snack rubbed against Sassless in confirmation.

“Look, I know I’m not going to talk my way out of this,” I said, which wasn’t entirely true, but close enough, “but I have to ask you a question. Please understand it’s just professional curiosity.” I pointed at Sassless. “Do you ever change it up on Snack here, or has she made you a one gender being? I mean, I know you change gender, but do you ever do it as a, I don’t know, surprise, or something?”

Sadly, they never really had a chance to answer that as the sound of a door crashing open cut off further conversation. Suddenly Sassless and Snack had their hands up, and two guardian robots with sleek black casings, featureless head pieces and military grade laser rifles were covering them. Another robot unclamped my heels and turned me right side up.

“INQUIRY — ARE YOU PHYSICALLY SOUND?” I winced at the grating voice synthesizer. Why so many people skimp on bio-relations packages for their ‘bots when they spend freely on everything else, I’ll never understand.

“I’m ‘sound’, yes.” I favored the two comedians with my best triumphant smirk.

“STATEMENT — YOU WILL COME WITH US.” By now all three robots had their weapons out, and as I looked them over I realized that none of them had constabulary markings. My momentary surge of joy followed my blood into my feet.

“Do you work for Slow Samus?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“STATEMENT — CORRECT.”

“I figured,” I said, bending down to rub my ankles. I was probably going to be restrained again soon, so I might as well take a moment to rub some feeling back in them while I could.

“Thiss isss crap!” hissed Sassless, though rather less menacingly now that its hands weren’t filled with laser pistols or edged weaponry. “He’sss our bounty! Fair and sssquare!”

“Liar!” I turned and saw Orange Candy in the doorway, hands on her hips and a smug expression on her face. “You tried to rip me

off! You're lucky I don't have these 'bots blast you right here!"

"STATEMENT — YOU LACK THE AUTHORITY TO GIVE THIS UNIT ORDERS." Apparently the robot that had helped me down was calling the shots. It turned its featureless face-plate in the direction of the girl. "IMPERATIVE — SHUT YOUR MOUTH, HAB RAT!"

The smile slipped off Orange Candy's face. "But you said—"

"INQUIRY — DID THIS UNIT STAMMER."

"I just—"

"STATEMENT — TAKE IT UP WITH THE BOSS." Leader Bot turned its head slightly, and one of the other units fell in place by my side. I took the custodial hint. Leader Bot swiveled back in the direction of the bounty hunters. "IMPERATIVE — LEAVE NOW AND DO NOT RETURN."

"Let'sss go, Sssnack," said Sassless, before the little Urseminite could argue her way into a trash compactor by way of laser fire. It fixed those dark eyes on me. "You lucked out thiss time, Ssslam, but thiss isssn't over."

Orange Candy watched the two comedians trudge out, a petulant pout still fixed on her features. "It's not fair," she sniffed when they'd left.

"STATEMENT — THIS UNIT LACKS PROGRAMMING OF SUFFICIENT COMPLEXITY TO CARE ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS." Orange Candy threw one last sour look over her shoulder before vanishing. Leader Bot gave the area one last scan—an actual scan, a blue beam pulsing out from a node on its check—then gestured with its rifle. "IMPERATIVE — GET MOVING, SLAM. STATEMENT — THE BOSS IS EAGER TO MEET YOU."

I've had worse introductions, but at least they didn't knock me out this time.

After a quick tour of some of the asteroid's interior tunnels, I was ushered through a gilded access hatch and into a lavish office area, the likes of which I haven't seen since the great director Morty Action—yes, *that* Morty Action—threw me out of his office after my audition for the lead role in *Space Rangers Against the Galaxy XI: Bug Brothers Unite*. In my defense, nothing about the casting notice said we couldn't audition with the sex scene instead of one of the big battle speeches.

And how was I supposed to know his secretary was also his stepdaughter?

Aside from the genuine Deshi illumaweave carpets, the minty scent of incense smoldering in the corner, the stylish multimorphic smart furniture, and the first-class computer bank humming off in the corner, the main feature was a floor-to-ceiling holographic way-window. That neat little number alone probably cost almost the same amount as the *Wounded Pride*, though considering the condition of the ship maybe that's not the best comparison. In this case, the way-window was set to some strange laboratory scene, complete with bubbling liquids in oddly-shaped vessels and strange machines of unknown purpose. On the whole the transition from modern office to mad science was extremely jarring, especially when you consider the person standing in front of the divide. The robots filed out while I was still taking everything in, leaving me alone with the big boss.

Slow Samus was a Dolom, and an incredibly dapper one at that. Most of the big lunks don't put much stock in fashion, preferring more utilitarian clothing that accommodates the whole three arm, three leg thing. Besides, it's really hard to design a fine suit when a client can just spin their head around on a whim and suddenly make a totally different side their "front." Slow Samus must have had a hell of a tailor, though, because he was wearing a polymaterial blend that somehow managed to have a number of different fronts positioned at regular intervals, each one of them quite stylish. I was halfway through a memo to my wardrobe specialist asking him to find out

exactly who did work for Slow Samus when I realized that Sethany didn't work for me anymore, and also that my life was probably still in serious danger.

"So, Mister Hardstone, I'm afraid you must see how impossible your mission has become." Slow Samus had a droning monotone, turning his head around slowly to face me as he spoke, his voice rumbling around the room like an roll of thunder. He steepled the fingers of two of his hands under his chin and tapped them together heavily. "I hope you appreciate the irony before you die."

I looked around but there was no one else in the room. "Are you talking to me?"

"You have been a supreme nuisance, Mister Hardstone." Slow Samus replied, in his monotone rumble. His free arm snaked out from behind him, a sonic wave pistol in hand. He pointed it in my direction and thumbed the activator, causing a high-pitched whine to fill the room as the firing light warmed from blue to orange. "It will be a great pleasure to finally kill you."

"I don't know who you think I am, but that is *really* not necessary," I protested, backing up to the door as non-threateningly as possible. *Had I ever played someone named Hardstone?* I hadn't used a stage name in a long time—even in most of my movies they just named my character after me, sold more copies that way—but my memory was ransacking the early roles in my back catalogue at high speed: Captain Steelman Dirk, Mass Driver, Booster Rock Her, Professor Manly Longfellow, Delivery Robot SXY-1, Critical Massive, Guy In Doctor's Office, Sexy Guy In Doctor's Office, Lucky Neighbor, Extremely Flexible Flower Shop Patron... nope, no Hardstone.

"Now... DIE," Slow Samus roared. Nothing changed about his inflection, though, just his volume. He pointed the pistol directly at my head, and all I could think of was that after years spent hiding who I really was, I was about to be killed by a case of mistaken identity. I couldn't help it; I burst out laughing. Slow Samus looked at me, puzzled, and slowly lowered the gun. "What. What did I do." It took

me a second to realize he was asking a question—you just couldn't tell with that droning monotone. Realizing that only made me laugh even harder, until I was just about doubled over.

"You pointed a gun at me!" I managed to get out as I tried to catch my breath between fits of laughing. I held up one hand, palm out placatingly. "I'm not sure who Hardstone is, but trust me, I'm not him."

"Derek Hardstone." Slow Samus prompted, but I shrugged—the name meant nothing to me. Slow Samus looked even more confused. "Really. He's the main character from the whole *Impossible Squad* series. Well, from *Mission Zero* to *The Infinity Divide*, but the ones after that don't count." He gestured to his clothing with one hand and the backdrop with another, the pistol now hanging limply at his side in his last hand. "That was Doctor Apocalypse's big villain speech, from *Mission Zero*. The part where he has Derek captured in his lab and he's about to activate the Omega device."

"I'm afraid I haven't seen it," I said. Behind my back I pressed the door release, but it just buzzed under my fingers. Deadlocked. I should have figured.

"You haven't." Slow Samus seemed on the border of downright disbelief. His three shoulders slumped. "I've been practicing that speech for ages, too." He seemed to remember he had a deadly weapon in one hand and put it away sullenly.

"Hey, no, it was... it was pretty good," I ventured. Another insight from years in the film business—everyone is insecure, so even obvious flattery still pays off more often than not. "I mean, I don't know the original, but still, very convincing."

Slow Samus perked up a bit at that. "Really. You think?"

"Oh sure," I said, putting on a smile. "I was sweating!"

"I could tell," the big lunk droned, looking relieved. "I knew it just took someone with real acting experience to see it."

"So... you do know who I am?"

“Oh, yes,” Slow Samus said, with a dismissive wave. “When Wemy came in looking to get back at those bounty hunters for stiffing her, I asked who the bounty was. When she told me it was you, I almost couldn’t believe it. To think that such a huge star had come to our little asteroid field.” He shut down the waywindow’s active display, putting it in the default setting of a field of slowly shifting colors, and walked over to me in that disconcertingly smooth way the Dolomé have of getting around. “I’m a big, big fan,” he said, clasping both my hands in all three of his own and pumping them up and down so hard I thought he’d dislocate both my shoulders.

“I’ll bet you are!” I replied with as much cheer as I could manage.

“Really, I’ve seen all of them at least ten, fifteen times,” Slow Samus droned. “Ask me a question on anything, from any one of your movies. I know them all.”

“No, that’s fine, I believe you,” I said, with a friendly chuckle.

A cloud came over his features and Slow Samus crossed two of his arms, while the third strayed back to where the gun had disappeared to a moment ago. “Ask me.”

“Ah, OK, well, um,” I stalled, wondering if it would be worse to ask an easy question that might make him angry or a hard question that might make him frustrated. Easy was probably safer on his ego. “Who was my co-star in *That’s No Moon*?”

“Haley Bopp,” Slow Samus responded immediately. “See. I told you.” His arms relaxed, and so did I. “Now that you’re here, I’m really looking forward to getting some tips from you about getting into the business.”

“Looks like you’re pretty successful already.” I gestured around at the lavish office. “I mean, I got into it because I had nothing going, but what more could you want? Looks like you’ve got a sweet deal here.”

“This rock field is easy pickings,” Slow Samus grumbled. “Profitable but dull. So about two orbits ago, I’m up late watching the ho-

los—one of yours, *Up All Knights IV* I think—and all of a sudden it hits me. I can do that.” He pounded his chest proudly. “So I start doing the speeches, some of the action scenes, you know. My boys all say I’m a natural actor. They say my Doctor Apocalypse is way better than the original.”

“I just bet they do.” I tried to imagine what it would take to put up with regular servings of that level of stellar performance on top of the hazards of a life of crime. I’d wager a fair number of his boys got caught on purpose, just for a break.

“I read that you need clips to show the agencies, so I even redid one of your movies, shot for shot,” he continued. “My favorite—*To Boldly Grope VI: The Unabashed Thumping*.” Slow Samus leaned in confidentially. “I played your part, Captain Dirk. It was very fun, especially the zero-gravity scene. Much messier than I expected, though.” His eyes grew distant with memory. “Fluids are very... unpredictable in that environment.”

I long ago learned to suppress my gag reflex, but I have to say, that mental image sorely tested even my limits. Fortunately Slow Samus was too busy reminiscing to notice as I turned a sicker shade of green. I recovered in time to say: “That sounds great. I’m sure you brought a lot of, ah, energy to the role.”

“Do you really think so.” Slow Samus asked. I couldn’t manage another lie so soon without vomiting, so I just nodded instead. “We will watch it together then, soon. You can give me many pointers, so I look good for the agencies.” He reached out and tousled my hair with what must pass for affection to a self-deluded gangster. “I told the boys you would be a good sport and help me. We must make the time count.”

My heart skipped. “Time until what?”

“Until Blood Howl arrives, of course.” Slow Samus’ smile was back, but decidedly less friendly now. “You did not think I would pass up your bounty, did you. That kind of payoff would go a long way toward putting my name in front of the best directors in the

galaxy. I might even buy a studio or two.” He laughed, a sound like a liquid fuel rocket rumbling to life. “This way, everyone wins.”

“Except me,” I pointed out, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Don’t worry,” Slow Samus droned as the door unlocked and two guardian robots stepped in to flank me. “It will take a while for him to arrive. In the meantime, I rented out the local holodome, and the boys are getting everything set up so we can have ourselves a nice marathon.” The robots yanked my hands behind me and linked them together with metal restraints. “We’ll watch my version alongside yours, so you can tell me what I must do better.” He made a sweeping gesture. “Imagine—watching our work on screens a hundred meters high.”

At the time I said my aim wasn’t deliberate, just an unfortunate accident brought on by nerves. This probably spared me a beating and more restraints, but between you and me, it was a lie.

I threw up on Slow Samus on purpose.

§ § §

While Slow Samus went off to find another impossible suit for the night’s cinematic delights to come, I was herded to a far less glamorous room marked “Heat Maintenance” where the guardian robots unceremoniously shoved me inside. The walls were only finished on three sides, with the fourth being the natural stone of the asteroid, and the whole room was shockingly warm, so much so that the rock face was dripping with condensation. A few stacks of platform crating covered up one corner, while a complex machine with warning signs in several languages took up another, a number of pipes apparently feeding it from a thin panel in the rock wall.

Seated on one of the crates away from the door was a dejected looking Orange Candy, or Wemy as Slow Samus had called her. Her hair was mussed, a seam on her bodysuit was torn and she had a nasty fat lip. She wasn’t restrained, but her posture alone read defeated.

“STATEMENT — WE WILL RETURN SOON.” It was impos-

sible to tell if it was the same Leader Bot from earlier, though it sure sounded the same. “IMPERATIVE — WAIT HERE AND DO NOT CAUSE TROUBLE.”

“Fine by me,” I said. I turned to show them my restraints. “Could you remove these first though? They’re a bit uncomfortable.”

“INQUIRY — ARE YOU EMPLOYED AS A COMEDIAN. STATEMENT — BECAUSE YOU ARE PROVOKING A HUMOR RESPONSE IN THIS UNIT.” There was a flurry of whistles and clicks that must have been robot laughter. “IMPERATIVE — SIT DOWN AND CEASE VOCALIZATION.”

I went meekly to a crate and sat as directed. The robots sealed the hatch, and I could hear the whirr-clack of a conventional hard-lock. “What happened to you?” I asked Wemy after they’d gone. “No, wait, let me guess. You mouthed off to one of the robots, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Wemy said sullenly.

“Might be time to pick up a little impulse control,” I said amiably, flexing my arms as much as the restraints would allow. I was pretty sure there was enough give, even more sure I could disable them, but the question was, what would I do after I was out? I need a few crucial bits of information.

“I’m done with this rock. I hate it here.” Wemy scuffed the floor with her boot. “They’ll probably up their cut of my take, too, and I already barely cover my rentals.” She scuffed the floor some more, agitation clearly building up like a static charge, and I waited for her to get it out of her system. Finally she threw her head back and shouted “This suuuuuuucks!”

When no one outside responded to the shout, I moved to sit down next to her. “Do you know what the local time is?”

Wemy looked at me suspiciously. “What does it matter? We’re hosed.”

“Humor me.”

“Seventh indicator, orange going red.” Damn. If I remembered

our loading schedule, that meant I had a little over one indicator left to make it back to the *Wounded Pride* before she blasted off. They didn't tend to come looking too hard when you didn't return to the ship in Class D. Most of the time they just put up the usual bounty and hauled jets. Most poor bastards got caught within a couple of standard cycles and dragged back to TransGalaxy anyway, with extra time added to their contracts and even less luxurious berths to look forward to than rustbuckets like the *Wounded Pride*. Wemy's voice took on the faintest hint of hope. "Do you have some kind of escape plan?"

"Yeah, maybe." I nodded in the direction of the machine. "What is that thing? Heat exchanger?"

"Yeah, they drilled gas tunnels parallel to the habs." She tried to illustrate the concepts she was describing with hand gestures, with mixed results. "The air inside gets heated up as a byproduct of the mineral processing in the lower levels, then circulated to the rest of the facility as cheap heat." Wemy shrugged.

"So there are tunnels running right alongside the corridors?" I glanced at the walls speculatively. "Interesting."

Wemy snorted. "Don't get too excited. The tunnels are wide enough for maintenance 'bots, but the air's super toxic from all the chemicals. Half of this rig is to purify it for recycling, otherwise it'd be totally useless." She made an exaggerated gagging sound. "If you breathe it in, it's fatal after, like, seconds."

"But most every hab has one of these units connected to the tunnels, right?"

"Well, if they want heat, yeah." Wemy arched an eyebrow at me. It did a very nice thing to the lines of her face, though I didn't have time to really appreciate that at the moment. "Why?"

"In a moment, I'm going to need you to put your hands on my shoulders, hard, and pop them back in, because I'll be too busy trying not to scream to do it myself. OK?" I didn't give her time to get skit-tish, but took a deep breath, flexed my arms one last time and rotated

my shoulders around to bring my arms to the front. As promised, a pair of loud popping sounds accompanied the movement and my vision went white as I bit down, hard. The pain seemed to stretch out time but then Wemy put her hands on me and neatly popped both shoulders back into place with firm, decisive movements. When the white had receded, I said, “You didn’t hesitate. Why not?”

Wemy shrugged. It was a go-to gesture for her, apparently. “My mother was in the company medical corps, so after academy I used to stop by the clinic and sit with on her shifts. When I was old enough she let me help out. It’s not hard if you’re not squeamish or anything.”

“Well, I appreciate it.” She blushed a little and swept her hair behind her ear with one hand. I held up my restraints. “Can you do me a favor and read the maker code on these? I know they’re a Fiorina model but I need the specific model number.”

“Sure.” She squinted, reading aloud. “Eff arr why dash one six one.”

“Good. You said you know my work, right?” Wemy nodded. “Remember *Prisoner’s Dilemma II: Hard Time*? The scene with the xenophiliac secretarial pool?” She grinned, remembering the scene. “Those were Fiorina restraints, so...” I held out my hands and she took hold of them tight. I braced my feet as best I could. “On three. One, two, three!” She pulled and I twisted my wrists right as her weight tugged on them, and with a *shink* the restraints released.

Overbalanced, I fell forward and wound up taking her to the ground, sprawled on top of her in a way that reminded us of our compatible biology quite delightfully. Our eyes met, her surprise no doubt mirroring my own, everything so perfectly cliché that I waited for the “...and cut!” This being real life, though, I just apologized and shifted off of her, rubbing my sore wrists.

“I didn’t think that was real,” Wemy said hurriedly as we got to our feet. “The restraints, I mean.”

“Everyone thinks we gimmicked them for the films,” I replied, “but it’s a real defect in the merchandise. We had an ex-Fiorina de-

signer with us on set for all the restraint scenes. I can't believe anyone out there still buys them." I kicked the restraints away. "Prudish quartermaster, I guess. Come on, we have to get that panel open."

"To the heat tunnel? Are you crazy?" Wemy spread her hands in an exasperated gesture. "Did you miss the part about the poison gas?"

"We need a way out of here, and I can hold my breath for a surprisingly long amount of time." Most adult entertainers are pretty good at that trick by necessity, but I'm above even industry standards in that regard, if I do say so myself. After all, we didn't have the budget to do the underwater scenes in *Treasured Chests III: Hauling Booty* with holosimulated terrain, and without the lusty mermaid queen the rest of the plot doesn't make sense. So it was develop some serious lung capacity or lose the gig to someone else who had it. I'm a lot of things, but quitter isn't one of them. I knelt down and inspected the panel. "You ever take one of these apart?"

"Uh, yeah. Boredom, you know?" Wemy said, inspecting it with me. There were a series of safety clamps as well as a security sensor. Wemy tapped the sensor with her nails. "These are standard all over the station. Not too hard to disable." She traced some of the wires. "There's a backup, though, and that'll be buried in the machine, too deep to get at. Failsafe to prevent the bad air from poisoning, like, half the station if a panel leaks."

"What happens if that goes off?"

"Well, if you don't shut it down, the blast doors'll close and you're hosed. It takes, like, hours to cut through those, plus it sets off a whole bunch of alarms." She ran a hand through her hair, which was matted down with sweat. "What are you thinking?"

"Keep it simple," I said. "You disable the first alarm, I pull this panel and travel down the air corridor to the next panel. I pop that, disarm the first alarm there, come back and bring you through the tunnel. We exit the next room before the blast door comes down and haul ass for the spaceport."

“Maybe you can hold your breath that long, but what do I do?” Wemy asked.

“Here.” I stripped off my shirt and tossed it to her. “Hold your breath and hold this over your mouth. Between the two you should be OK. I’ll make sure you have a clear path.”

“Oh.” She looked down at the shirt, then back up at me. Her eyes lingered on the way up. When I first joined TransGalaxy I was worried about what would happen to my physique schlepping around the galaxy on a freighter, but those fears turned out to be groundless. A lot of heavy lifting comes with Class D freight, and I guess it showed. I started to work on the clamps, but she put her hand on my arm. “How do I know you’re going to come back?” She shifted nervously. “I mean, I tried to, you know, bounty you.”

The honesty clinched it. “Come on. You think you’re the only one who ever did something stupid to try to get out of a boring life?” I replied, looking her square in the eye to make sure she could read me. “If I held bad decisions against people, inside a week I wouldn’t have had anyone left to work with.” I tried a bit of a grin. “Besides, you mouthed off to that ‘bot, so you can’t be *all* bad.”

Wemy didn’t smile back, but searched my face so carefully and for so long that I began to wonder if I’d gone too far somehow, said the wrong perhaps, when abruptly she leaned in and kissed me. It was a short kiss, but then again you don’t tend to judge their quality by duration, and I certainly had no complaints.

“Let’s do it,” she said, fiddling with the security sensor until it went dark. I watched how she did it, repeated it for her to approve, and then shoed her away from the panel. She tied my shirt over her face like bandanna as I popped the clamps on the access panel. With a deep breath I was in.

It was dark in the heat tunnel, a lot narrower than I’d expected, and so hot, but I have plenty of experience fitting into all sorts of places under worse conditions, especially while covered in sw—well, you get the idea.

Let's just say I've never let a lady down before, and that tunnel was no exception.

§ § §

"You're late, Shine," growled Captain Vaan as Wemy and I jogged up the gangplank. The *Wounded Pride's* engines were already blue, going white. We'd arrived with maybe a fifth of an indicator to spare, if that. The scarred Templar was a darker shade of purple than normal, though, which was never a good sign, and he worried at the end of his razza stick like a bar'ii hound with a bone. "I thought I was going to have to drop a bounty on you, too."

"Too?" I asked, puzzled. Wemy hovered behind me anxiously. "Who skipped?"

"Haaken," Captain Vaan spat the name along with a pulpy string of greenish razza juice. "Damn fool was at the cantina last night, told Moosh that rash was the last straw. As if we were supposed to know he had allergies?" Captain Vaan gave a phlegmy snort. "Anyway, he's off trying to convince some local lowlives to take him on as an enforcer, and we're light one crew because I don't have time to do more than drop bounty on him."

Wemy and I exchanged barely contained grins at the mention of enforcers. If Haaken thought working muscle for Slow Samus was better than hauling Class D freight, I hoped he had a strong stomach for mangled cinema classics. "Well, no need to drop bounty on me, Cap'n. Ran into some people who used to know me."

"Yeah, yeah," Captain Vaan grunted, tabbing my roster light to green. "Who's this?" the Templar asked, glaring over his clipboard as if just noticing the sweaty, beautiful Arsubaran girl at my elbow.

"As it happens? Someone to fill Haaken's spot," I declared, clapping my arm around her shoulders. "Candy here asked me about signing up. What do you say?"

"Candy?" Wemy whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

"I'll explain later," I whispered back.

“Traveling a little light, are we?” Captain Vaan sized her up, chewing noisily on the razza stick for a long moment before finally nodding. “I know how that is. We’ll do the paperwork in transit.” He gave her a searching look. “You better not be playing us for a taxi service, little missy. You try to skip at our next stop and I’ll drop a bounty on you so high your own grandmother will haul your head in for a payday. Got me?”

“Yes. Sir. Captain.” Candy shook the captain’s hand and that was that.

“Good. Now stow up, we’re lifting in five, assuming Moosh did his damn job.” As we headed up the gangplank, the captain handed me my preflight tablet. “Until I have a duty for her, the girl shadows you. Get to it.”

I looked down at the tablet but managed to hold back the laughter until the captain was out of earshot. “What is it?” Candy asked, looking slightly panicked at my sudden burst of amusement. I couldn’t actually manage to answer, so I passed her the tablet instead. Our scheduled deliveries were listed in a neat column, but across the top scrolled the bright yellow letters marking a brand-new Priority Pickup Request from Punctum Galaxias’ outlet on Qlendathu. Sixteen hundred cases of a holo retrospective, *The Hammer Drops: The Very Best of Kinky Slam, Volume I*, for an anniversary launch party. Destination? The Obscenity Spire.

Naturally.

I don’t like to complain about being famous, I really don’t. It’s not like it hasn’t given me a lot of great memories and useful skills. But every once in a while, it would be really nice if I could walk away from it.

Or least find a way to make it pay a bit better.

About Peter Woodworth

Pete Woodworth is a New Jersey native and resides there still, happily teaching English at a small local college. His fiction has appeared in the Gimme Shelter anthology, Steampunk Tales magazine, and sites such as Terrible Minds and 365 Tomorrows. Working for White Wolf, Evil Hat, West End Games and others, he has also written a stack of role-playing books, for both tabletop and live-action play. He even enjoyed working as a rock journalist until his newspaper finally caught on that most newspaper readers are over fifty and do not know or care about Flogging Molly. When he isn't grading papers or writing novels, he reads a lot, runs too many RPGs, is way too addicted to Fantasy Flight board games, makes mix CDs constantly, has a terrible weakness for "paranormal" TV shows (no matter how cheesy), and LARPs whenever he can swing it. You can find him online at peterwoodworth.com.

By Gods Damned and Bounty Blessed

by Nathan Crowder

Ogra wouldn't call it love, but Myryawl had fought fang and claw next to her for two years of her contract on the *Gynn Aquatina*, and in the arena that counted for something. On other planets—other ships—the two might have been rivals or even enemies. Ryjyllians such as Myryawl were known throughout the Frontier Zone as honorable warriors, feared and respected. But Ogra was Hacragorkan, and thus regarded as little more than a space-worthy savage who just liked to fight. Even she had to admit that it was a fair assessment at the time. Yet the aging Ryjyllian engineer took Ogra under his wing when she signed on, a former pit-fighter with dreams of chasing bounties across the Frontier Zone. On a five-year loss-opt contract with TransGalaxy, working Class D cargo, finding someone like Myryawl saved her life in more ways than she could name. No, it wasn't love. But deep within her leathery green breast of the hard-as-nails bounty hunter, it was something close. Something like family.

Her Ryjyllian mentor deserved a warrior's death. With the kinds of jobs the *Gynn Aquatina* took, he was damn-near guaranteed one, until a conman named Reeve Sklarr took that away from him.

"You must really need the money to go after a bounty this small," Seth Eck quipped behind her. She glanced over her meaty shoulder, having momentarily forgotten the *Aquatina's* newest crewmember had been sent with her. She saw him, framed between the delicate spirals of two ember-mite nests on the path behind her. The trail up from the port was thick with the things, and she made a note to be long gone before sunset and the pernicious pests woke up.

Seth seemed oblivious to the uniform structures, as if they were sculptures or natural rock formations barely up to his chin. That made him a little tall for an Arsubaran, but still a full head shorter than her, and probably half her mass. His skin was the color of an

over-ripe Kulufruit and without scar or blemish. After five missions and seven combats, Ogra had yet to see the kid fight. She scowled and turned back to the path. “Some things are more important than money.”

Under the oppressive azure sky, his reedy voice seemed to carry far too well. “The sheet said something about him selling inferior grade tech?”

Ogra knew the bounty sheet for Reeve Sklarr like it was tattooed amid the writhing black vine pattern on her left arm. It had been her highest priority search at every port the *Gynn Aquatina* hit since Myryawl’s death. She could still smell the ozone and burning hair from the cybernetic eye that shorted and set her friend’s skull on fire from the inside. “Cybernetic implants, kid. He set up on the edge of war-zones and sold knock-off and inferior grade cybernetics that he installed himself—for a fat fee, of course.”

There was a pause as Seth thought it over. “I wouldn’t think there’s much call for that around these parts. I heard N’vida is a small mining operation.”

“Different angle this time,” Ogra said, her broad jaw clenched as she made out the low, flat roofs of the encampment before them. Her info said N’vida only had about a hundred people there, almost all Arsubaran. The town looked like it could handle twice that many residents at least. “I’m told Sklarr found religion.”

“Religion?” Seth stopped walking, forcing Ogra to choose between stopping or leaving him behind.

She sighed before half-turning to face him. “Apparently, he’s a messiah or something.” She tried figuring out why the sensor operator looked so conflicted by the news. His arms hung straight down at his sides, fingertips almost to the hem of the ridiculous oversized red coat he always wore, with sleeves that would have been baggy on a giant. Then she remembered. “Weren’t you with a church on that planet where we hired you?”

Seth swallowed hard. “I was... am... I am a priest.”

Well, Ogra thought, maybe that explains why he's avoided fights. Funny it hadn't really come up before now. "And now you're a Class D sensor operator. That's quite the demotion."

"It's a big universe. There are countless faiths. How do you know Reeve Sklarr isn't a legitimate messiah?"

Ogra blinked, caught off guard by the question. "I guess I don't. But his god better not get in my way, because I have a bounty to collect." She turned and pressed on, her long stride faster now that she had her destination in sight. She'd be damned if she had to take that path with an unconscious bounty over one shoulder and embermites trying to get into her boots.

After a few seconds, Seth jogged after her.

Once she spent a few minutes scanning the rough homes made of scrap wood and shipping containers through her binoculars, Ogra was able to identify Sklarr's likely hidey hole. There were only two buildings too large to be the homes of struggling miners. One flaunted wide open windows and a flickering neon sign of a bar. The other was more conservative, a simple wooden structure backed up against a low hill and with no adornment other than multi-paned windows along the side. The frugality suggested it was a church, while the expensive convertible low-altitude flyer parked nearby meant money. If Reeve Sklarr wasn't there, Ogra was confident she'd find someone who could point the way to bounty.

She got lucky, after a sense, and found Sklarr the first place she looked. Several minutes later, while she was falling backward into darkness Ogra wondered briefly where it had all gone wrong. The answer was simple: she shouldn't have underestimated the power of faith. More importantly, she shouldn't have let a few dozen true believers get behind her when she was so close to the sacrificial pit. Usually, she could count on her Hacragorkan heritage and imposing physique to keep dirt farmers in line. But a mob? That was something else entirely.

And that bastard Sklarr had whipped this town full of hicks into

a wide-eyed mob.

What's more, Seth had mysteriously disappeared as soon as Ogra crossed the threshold of the church. As she fell, Sklarr's confident laugh ringing in her ears, the bounty hunter barely had time to curse, "Where in the blue hells are you, Seth?" before impact with the pit floor knocked the breath from her lungs. She was thankful for her synthetic plate vest, which protected her from the debris at the base. As expected, the stone floor thirty feet below where she had been shoved was littered with a deadfall of desiccated bones.

A disposable communicator—not much more than a small stud held to the skin behind her left ear with an adhesive pad—buzzed at her. "You're going to try and find some way to blame me for this, I suppose?"

As Ogra's eyes adjusted to the darkness of the church's sacrificial pit, a ring of jury-rigged mining lamps above her flared to life. "I assume you're somewhere you can see the show?" Before the sudden light change forced her to blink away the unexpected brightness, she managed to get a better sense of her situation. The place looked like a natural cave, roughly dome-shaped with the light-ringed opening up top through which she had fallen. There was a looming darkness along the far wall, which could be a passage deeper into the cave network. But Ogra had been doing this job for too long to think she'd be that lucky.

"When you were trying to convince Sklarr to come along peacefully, did you see the door behind him and to the right? Or were you lost in the moment?"

Of course. That's where the Arsubaran system's operator had gone. It stood to reason there would be a side door to the building. If she hadn't been so focused on getting her hands around Sklarr's throat, she might have thought of it herself. "I saw the door. Sklarr's private area, I assume? Anything worthwhile?"

"I know a bit more about the local religious customs. Can you see..." Seth's pause betrayed his concern. "The locals call it the God

Stone. They've been making sacrifices to it for generations up here."

As if on cue, the darkness that was too convenient to be another tunnel, shifted towards Ogra. It wasn't moving fast, but without an easy exit, speed didn't matter quite as much. "Yeah. And I'm pretty sure it sees me."

Reeve Sklarr's God Stone looked like two tons of pale, glistening meat tucked beneath a slate-colored lozenge of shell big enough to be a shuttlecraft. The fleshy, exposed portion that rippled across the ground had the appearance of an undulating tongue, while a shapeless head was elevated to about mid-height along the front of the shell. The head was translucent white, with floating black dots of eyes, while along the top of the shapeless mass she saw a darkened line like a lance or spear, sheathed in the soft meat. For a second, Ogra heard Myryawl's laugh in her head. The old fool would have loved the sight of this monolithic beast sliding implacably towards her across a carpet of bones.

"So, from what I can gather digging through their media files, Sklarr showed up here a few months ago. He went into the sacrifice pit willingly and tamed the God Stone somehow."

Ogra crouched to pick up a splintered thigh bone, never taking her eyes off the giant snail the locals worshiped. She hadn't seen anything quite like it before, and she had spent years in the arena facing all kinds of threats. Rule number one: Avoid direct physical contact with hostile alien life-forms where possible. Nature had a way of protecting its own. "In your professional priestly opinion, what happens if I kill their god?"

"You demoralize the local populace," Seth said, a grim smile evident in his voice. "And Sklarr loses his power over them."

The God Stone had moved to within fifteen feet of Ogra. She suddenly realized that her attention had been so focused on the creature's eyes and the concealed spine-like line in its head, that she hadn't noticed the more immediate threat. The giant snail had lifted its front end off the ground just enough to extend the gossamer flaps

of what she assumed was a feeding tube. Like a pale tunnel leading deep into the creature's digestive tracts, it was more than large enough to swallow her whole. "Stay put in his office for as long as you can and see if you can figure out how he tamed this thing. If you have to start shooting," she almost laughed at the idea as soon as it crossed her lips, "make sure you don't kill Sklarr. I want to take him in alive."

"Just Sklarr?" Over the link of the communicator came the sound of guns being cocked.

The feeding tube extended towards her, just within the reach of her thighbone club. When Ogra swung to discourage the advance, her body took a few seconds longer to respond than usual. It wasn't a good sign. Not a good sign at all, even though the waving lips of the giant soft mouth pulled back a few feet at the sting of her improvised weapon. The giant sumbitch was probably breathing some kind of airborne neurotoxin at her as it approached and she hadn't even noticed. "Seth, you have my permission to shoot and kill anything else that you see moving up there."

"Outstanding."

If Seth had anything more to add, Ogra didn't hear it. Her heart thudded like giant footsteps in her chest. She had fought bigger foes in the arena, but never in such poor conditions. Even in the seediest of unsanctioned fighting pits, they would have given her some kind of weapon, a knife at the very least. She swung the improvised thighbone club. It would do well enough to keep the tender parts of her foe from getting too touchy, but she wasn't going to win this fight by beating at the soft meat sack of its exposed flesh.

The head of the giant snail ducked low, jabbing towards Ogra in a motion so lazy she didn't even consider it an attack until it was too late. The soft head mashed against her chest, forcing her back a step. She also got her first good look at the long barb she had half-glimpsed in the creature's head crest. The length of her arm, it had a sharp tip that scratched across the synthetic plate armor of her vest. The back end terminated in delicate-looking, bright blue tubes lead-

ing to pulsing sacks and indistinct, blocky shapes. *Definitely a toxin.*
Important safety note: Do not let this thing poke you.

She batted the head aside with her improvised club before giving up ground to the Rock God. It was like hitting a giant sack filled with water and did nothing but shift its gaze a few degrees to the side.

Seth piped, his voice discordantly cheerful for Ogra's taste. "You still alive down there?"

"So far. I take it no one has tried to kill you yet?"

"They're all watching the show. So am I, actually," Seth added. "But I bet I have a better view. Smile for the camera!"

Ogra looked around the interior of the cave but didn't see cameras mounted to the wall, or floating camera drones orbiting the fight. "This is being broadcast somehow?" A moment of inspiration hit and she snapped the end off of the bone in her hand. She flipped it around and gripping the blunt end, jabbed at her foe's face with the jagged tip.

The meaty mass sagged under the pressure but didn't quite give. She dodged back with a few hopping steps. The tip of bone was wet, proving that she did actually puncture the damned beast at least a little bit.

"Yeah, there's a camera imbedded in that thing's head. I'm picking up some other streams also. Not sure what they mean, though. Hold on. Does this do something?"

The pulpy head reared back, quivering. If it had vocal chords, it would probably be screaming. "Congratulations. I think you just made it angry."

The Rock God lunged with unexpected speed. The rippling curtains of the feeding tube closed around Ogra from the waist down. Its grip was muscular, and she knew she wouldn't be able to fight it for long. Before it pulled her to the ground, Ogra gripped the end of the bone with both hands and thrust it as hard as she possibly could deep into the head of the giant snail, praying to gods of battle she never believed in that she might hit something vital.

The bone plunged deep, covering her hands with a sticky substance that was strangely odorless. The mouth muscles seized and rippled, wrenching her hands off the now-imbedded weapon. She felt her joints creak under the pressure, the kneecap grinding and pulling, the socket joints of her hips compacting. Breath was forced from her lungs, and it was only by grace of her armor that her ribcage didn't collapse.

Then suddenly, nothing.

The grip released and the massive snail went limp around her.

"Now, did that do something?" Seth asked.

"It stopped moving," Ogra said. "I don't know if I killed it or if you did something."

"Sklarr had a remote implant buried in it. I'm guessing it worked like primitive mind control, but this thing had a pretty primitive mind. I just turned it off. Oh, and if you could hurry up and get back topside, I think they found me."

Ogra pulled herself free from the still folds of the Rock God's mouth. She heard the sounds of gunfire before she was fully extracted. Projectile pistols thundered above her as she climbed up the shell of her fallen foe towards the light. "Are you okay up there, Seth?"

"We're just having a bit of a dogmatic disagreement. I'll be fine until they go for reinforcements."

With a running leap, Ogra reached the power conduits for the ring of lights. She watched locals running past the pit with their hands full of weapons— mostly tools and improvised clubs. For every five table legs or axe handles, she saw one decrepit laser rifle left over from some forgotten war. As precarious as her anticipated climb was, the bounty hunter was glad they had bigger concerns to keep them otherwise focused. "Do you still see Sklarr anywhere around?"

"Hiding behind his pulpit. I pop a round his way every time he pokes his head out. You know, just to keep him honest." Four shots sounded, followed by the crash and thud of three bodies hitting the floor. "Are you ready to accept Mantago as your savior? Are you will-

ing to take the Sacrament of the Gun?” Seth shouted at the townspeople.

Ogra pulled her massive bulk up the conduit, thankful it held until she could wrap her fingers over the lip of the pit. She hadn't heard of Mantago, but she wasn't what one would call spiritual. And she never much cared for guns. But Myyryawl loved his guns. He'd probably be having a blast right now if not for Reeve Sklarr. The thought of the conman's smirking face when his true believers forced her into the pit gave Ogra an extra burst of strength. With a grunt, she hoisted herself out of the pit and surveyed the situation.

The worn wooden church floor was slick with blood and scattered with the bodies of at least eight dead or dying townspeople. There were a half-dozen more hunkered down behind an over-turned table, waiting for the courage of conviction to rush the red-clad specter of death standing in the office doorway, twin pistols blazing. Ogra couldn't see Sklarr, but she could see his hiding place easily enough from where she crouched. The polished wood of his massive pulpit was cratered in three places, the exposed pale wood like a frightened eye in the cratered dark surface varnish.

“Reeve Sklarr,” Ogra proclaimed loudly for the second time today, “I'm here to claim bounty on you for charges filed on G'n'va. I'm authorized and bonded to bring you against your will if that's what it takes.”

The wily bastard bolted, leaping from the pulpit and through a nearby window with a crash of flying glass. Ogra rose to charge after him, only to take a searing laser blast across her left arm from one of the locals behind the table.

Seth answered with a shot of his own that took the top of the rifleman's head off like a lid. “I'll clean up back here,” he shouted to Ogra. “Go get your paycheck!”

Ogra gave her crew member a smile and half nod as she leapt out the window after Sklarr. Glass crunched between her boots and the sun-baked ground. She couldn't see the fleeing bounty, but he left

behind enough blood that tracking him wasn't a problem. *That's the trouble with diving out of a window*, Ogra thought. *It's not as easy and consequence-free as the holovids make it look.*

She heard a whirl and hum in the direction Reeve Sklarr had run, and it only took Ogra a second to remember the low-altitude flyer parked in that direction. If he had a chance to fire that up and get moving, he'd be able to beat her back to the port. Even on a rock small as this, her bounty would be able to book passage off-world before Ogra and Seth could make it back on foot. She was damned if she was going to get this close, kill a god, and let him get away from her.

Instinct took over. Head down, the burly bounty hunter raced in a straight line towards where she last spotted the disc-shaped craft. A low shed stood in her path, and she clambered over the top, vaulting from the far edge of the corrugated metal roof to the plush leather seats of the open-air cab. Her impact rocked the vehicle, and the near edge of the repulsor band chewed into the hard clay surface before rebounding. Sprawled between the rear seats, she was powerless to stop Sklarr from goosing the large disk up over the rooftops of N'vida.

The flying disk bucked and dove and ground against the roof of one of the repurposed shipping containers as Sklarr pulled a blaster pistol out of his robes. He fired off two shots at great risk to his control of the vehicle. One burned through the air far to the left of Ogra, while the other destroyed one of the comfy seats and some hopefully non-essential component behind it. Neither came close to hurting the bounty hunter as she struggled to her feet in the back.

Diverting his attention away from the controls caused the speeding low-altitude vehicle to plunge dangerously towards the uneven rocky surface below. Ogra grabbed the back of a seat to stabilize herself while Reeve Sklarr was faced with the choice of the lesser evil—a determined Hacragorkan bounty hunter or a high-speed crash. He seemed to have more faith in his driving skills than his aim. Tucking

the blaster back into his robe, the runaway messiah slapped a few buttons on the console and resumed control of the disk. Their course leveled out, a constant twenty feet or so above the ground.

“Myryawl! Do you know that name?” Ogra shouted at him as she used the seat backs to pull herself closer to her bounty. “You’re not getting away from me now so you might as well answer!”

He glanced over his shoulder at Ogra, eyes wide with panic. “One more step and I take us both down hard!”

Ogra didn’t doubt he meant it. She glanced at the dashboard of the vehicle and could see little more than the speed and altitude. She might survive the impact, but would be pretty broken up. Plus, they were a long way from civilization. Even if the crew of the *Gynn Aquatina* knew to look for her, they wouldn’t know where to start. And for a Class D ship like the *Aquatina*, time was money.

“Myryawl. Do you remember that name?” She growled, not taking her eyes off the gauges on the dash.

He ignored the question, countering with one of his own. “How much is the bounty on me? It can’t be much, can it?”

Ogra’s eyes narrowed. She could reach him in one lunge, and he knew it as well as she did. But he was confident that a crash at their current speed would turn both of them into bloody smears across a half mile of stone and sand. And what did a brutish Hacragorkan know about piloting a small craft like this? His tone made it clear. He had the upper hand as long as they were moving.

She answered flatly, clenching her powerful fists upon the chairs at her side. “Two thousand.”

Sklarr tilted his head back to laugh at her. The flying disk didn’t dip or wobble in the slightest. “Two thousand? That’s it? If you let me go, I’ll double, no, triple! I’ll triple that!”

Ogra thought about the money. Two thousand was small change, and three times that wasn’t a huge paycheck either. It wasn’t like she could retire on six thousand. She couldn’t even buy out the rest of her five-year contract with TransGalaxy with that. But for a

day's work and then looking the other way it was decent chunk of change.

"There was a Ryjyllian who came to you for a cybernetic eye back on G'n'va, just under a year ago. "

"Would this be the Myyryawl you keep mentioning?"

Ogra's teeth ground together so hard she was surprised they didn't crack and shoot sparks. "Yes. Myyryawl."

"Honestly? I don't know. Maybe." Sklarr shrugged. The craft kept sailing smoothly out across forgettable wasteland as the sun sank lower in the sky. Two of the three moons were already visible in the sky, one small and blue, the other large and banded in brown and white. "I did a lot of Ryjyllians there. Huge mercenary contingent came through at one point. I was up to my elbows in fur and fangs for a week."

"Myyryawl was engineer on a cargo ship, with a gray streak in his mane and half of the teeth in his lower jaw were steel." Ogra tried to picture more than the differences that set her friend apart from other Ryjyllians and found it frustratingly difficult. Could it be that less than a year was all it took for her to forget the face of the engineer who had given her so much? While it did nothing to diminish her rage, it did change the flavor of it, and turned a degree of the pain and guilt inward.

"Doesn't ring a bell, but I was working pretty fast and loose. Why? Are you looking to collect a bounty on him, too? Am I just a stepping stone to a bigger killer?"

Ogra licked her thin lips, cautious not to let a smile betray her intent. "Not exactly." She lunged forward. Sklarr reached for his blaster pistol out of sheer survival instinct, and she batted it away before he could bring it in line. The gun bounced off the edge of the vehicle, fired, and spun off to the planet surface.

With her left hand, Ogra palmed the back of Reeve Sklarr's head, and with a swift motion, drove his forehead into the dashboard. The craft stopped moving forward, hovering safely in place. She had seen

by the dash controls that the former doctor and renegade messiah had activated auto-stabilizers, keeping it a uniform distance from the ground. If Sklarr had bothered to look past his prejudices, he might have considered that a Hacragorkan might know how to operate a moving vehicle. Ogra was co-pilot of the *Gynn Aquatina*. She could thread a needle with this flying disk in her sleep.

Still holding Sklarr by the head, Ogra moved him to the passenger seat. Bubbles were forming in the bloody ruin of his nose which was all the proof she needed that Sklarr was still breathing. “Myryr-awl deserved a better death than you gave him.”

She considered snapping his neck and leaving his body in the desert for the ember mites. She’d get no bounty off it, but money wasn’t everything. And maybe she could find his stash and get compensation that way.

But death was easy. Sklarr didn’t deserve easy. Plus, it was hardly poetic.

Ogra pulled up the bounty on her data sheet and scrolled all the way to the bottom. There she saw who had put up funds for Reeve Sklarr’s return. While the bounty was issued through G’n’va authority, she was unsurprised to discover that it was an independent organization financing the bounty.

She turned the craft around and started back to N’vida where she hoped Seth was still alive and waiting for her. Once she got within range of the cheap communicator stud, she tried contacting him.

He answered right away. “I was beginning to think you left me behind.”

“Sklarr tried to bolt, but the good news is we now have a ride back to port. How are things back at town?”

“Well, they managed to shoot me twice,” he didn’t sound too concerned about the state of affairs.

“Should I be worried?”

Seth laughed. He was starting to grow on the bounty hunter.

“I’m coming back to get you. Can you look something up for me while you’re waiting?”

“Easy. What do you need?”

“I need to know about a group called Demonus Kalatari Company.”

Seth hummed tunelessly for a few seconds as he scoured the core for the requested information. “They appear to be a mercenary company.”

“All Ryjyllian?” Ogra asked with a toothy smile. She looked over at the unconscious Reeve Sklarr on the seat next to her.

“How did you know?”

“Lucky guess. I suppose we should give them a call and let them know we have something of theirs.”

“Sklarr? We’re turning Reeve Sklarr over to a Ryjyllian mercenary company?”

Ogra’s grip tightened on the controls. “They’re the ones who put up the bounty. Is that going to be a problem?”

“Problems? No! That’s perfect!” Seth laughed again. “If Sklarr pissed off a Ryjyllian merc company enough to put up a bounty, even a token one, then he deserves everything he has coming to him.”

Ogra decided that she could get along just fine with Seth. It was a relief. He had been signed into a five-year loss-option contract just like all Class D cargo crew that worked for TransGalaxy. The only way anyone saw the other end of a contract like that was death.

Based on previous missions, the captain had decided Seth might be a liability if he couldn’t handle himself in a fight. Thus far, he had been able to avoid them. Judging by his performance today, Ogra assumed it was more the fault of inconvenient timing and luck than anything else. The captain had figured an “accident” in some shitty little backwater while trying to collect a bounty would free the *Aquatina* from the burden and allow them to recruit a replacement at the next port. Now it didn’t look like that was necessary.

The dusty roofs of N'vida appeared over the hills ahead of her, and she steered towards the now useless church. "I'll pick you up out front in a few seconds. We have a bounty to deliver."

"And then?"

"Then we still have a few hours of shore leave before the *Aquatina* has to take off." She smiled, able to spot her crew member by his ugly red coat from half a mile away as he stepped out into the street. "And I have a few thousand credits that you're going to help me spend. I'm thinking drinks, a good dinner, and maybe we get you a new coat that doesn't make you look like a target."

"Drinks and dinner, yes," he said. "But coat stays. It's a church thing. Vestment of the Gun Saint and all that."

"Who am I to stand between a man and his religion?" Ogra ignored the groan of pain from the bounty folded into the seat beside her. With steady hand, she cruised in to pick up her crewmate.

About Nathan Crowder

A native son of the great southwest now living in the Seattle area, Nathan Crowder misses those clear night skies full of stars. What he does not miss is an opportunity to turn working-class men and women (and aliens) into heroes, because he does so every chance he gets. His short fiction has appeared in such places as Space Tramps, Wily Writers, Crossed Genres, Close Encounters of the Urban Kind, and The Edge of Propinquity. Online, he can be found at www.nathancrowder.com or at through his small publishing company, www.timidpirate.com.

Dinner at the Spacesick Restaurant

by Greg Stolze

Thirty-five million meters above the planet's surface, Darcy the waitress slept uneasily. Her mouth was half-open, gentle snores drifting forth as she turned over. A lock of hair, dark yellow with split ends, drifted between chapped lips and was spat out. She dreamed that an old friend, one she hadn't seen in years, had playfully tickled her with one of its many antennae.

One explosion rocked the station on which she slumbered, then a second. In her dreams, the muffled reports were incorporated as the bass beats of a school dance, only she'd forgotten her dress and everyone else was on roller skates. The next detonation was almost big enough to fully wake her, but since her dream had shifted to a recurring giant-toilet nightmare, she got to her feet and shuffled to her bathroom module, semi-conscious. When she got back to bed, she slept well, her slumbering self walking through the gently glowing swamps of the world below, with the host of her favorite childhood holograms, who was also somehow her great-aunt Euridice.

It wasn't until she got to work that she found out what had really happened.

§ § §

Darcy's home was named "WamCorp Class M4 Tethered Franchise #421" but she, and everyone else, just called it "The Franch." It didn't have a proper night or day, even though it orbited a planet's equator. That muddy green blot of a world was called "Porb" by its vent-necked, nasally-prominent natives and "WamCorp Franchise #421 Anchor" by TransGalaxy shipping's charting software. (To the frustrated, ever-churning strategic planning computers at the core of the Devalkamanchan Republic, it was "Potential Fuel Objective #18,742[b]" while the Republic's galactic rival, the Saldrallan Union,

had mistakenly listed the planet as destroyed during a confusing and politically motivated astrographic records purge. But the attentions of such grand and dreadful political entities were only of interest to two people on the station, one of whom was a spy and the other of whom was also a spy.)

Force-field viewports were too expensive for a Tethered Franchise station. Its thick, originally-transparent polymer portholes were glazed on the outside with fuel burnoff residue and scratched by countless impacts from micrometeors and the tiny chunks of ship-shell that came off the station's Class D and C clientele like dan-druff. Their interiors were, if anything, worse, smeared by the engine grime, condensed bad breath, and the discount skin-care products of a hundred different species. "Windows," by the dictionary definition, but they only gave a sulfurous yellow light when the station faced the sun, and turned blankly gray when it orbited away.

The only opening you could actually see through (somewhat) was the atrium ceiling of the diner where Darcy waited tables. It was stained and had a purple haze of solar burn around its edges, but one could still get a nice view of a corner of the planet, as well as some fair fireworks if a ship blasted off at a good angle.

The Franch was lit mainly by the squirmy aquamarine glow of light-pods brought up from Porb on its space elevator—tough, transparent tubes full of a bioluminescent slime with highly evolved self-cannibalization capabilities. A globe you could hold in your hand would give off its moderate, non-warming light for a hundred standard galactic years without needing to be opened, agitated or fed (though it wasn't warrantied for use at temperatures below 40 standard Arsubaran degrees). Glow-slime spheres were Porb's primary export to the galactic market.

With neither dusk nor dawn nor noon to guide them, people ate according to whatever schedules they'd set shipboard, operating on the circadian rhythms of dozens of species or thousands of worlds. Just as commonly, they'd land, grab a quick bite to eat, leave a

meager tip and then rush off to repair, reload and restock their ships. Or reject them and give up the starfarer's life, but that wasn't common. The kind of despair you got crewing a spaceship, even a cruddy Class D, didn't look so bad compared to Porb and the Franch.

There was nothing in the system to attract tourists. The only thing with pretensions of amusement on the Franch had been the nightclub, "The Obscene Effulgence." What had woken Darcy the night before was that part of the station being ejected to burn up, flaming orange and citrine in the murky Porbish atmosphere.

§ § §

Darcy looked wan and washed-out as she slouched down the hall towards work, but so did everyone on the station whose complexion wasn't purple or violet. She slipped through the service entrance, out of her worn cardigan, and into a fresh-laundered apron. Her well-used uniform was brown and yellow and did her complexion no favors.

"Hey, Foodtube," she said to the chef, a clunky industrial ingredient recombinator that had been tromping (and later rolling) around the kitchen since before she was born. "Quavis on duty?"

"QUAVIS.IS.PRESENT," it monotoned to her. It's original appellation was "StarSynchroNutri-Boss9000!" but Quavis' father Ambrose had hacked it to answer to "Foodtube" fifteen years earlier, as well as "Nutri-Boss" and several other names that Darcy wouldn't use because they were insulting, even to an inanimate object. Not long after reprogramming it, Ambrose had detached Foodtube's feet (driven by motives that remained obscure), abandoned his family, and fled the system.

With no agreed-upon "day" on the Franch, there was no socially inappropriate time to drink, and sometimes Quavis would tie one on for no reason at all. When this happened, she often wound up in Darcy's room sobbing and speculating that she'd driven her father away. As for Foodtube, every now and again it would leave the

kitchen and roll around the station, vainly seeking its feet.

“THERE.ARE.MANY.CUSTOMERS,” the robo-chef added, and Darcy sighed as she exited.

A look over the tables showed that the StarSynchroNutri-Boss9000! had spoken truth. Quavis was bustling towards a table full of muzzy-faced starfarers with a laden tray of hotmoss while a group of flounce-suited greenskins nearby were making agitated displays of nonchalance. She recognized them as habitués of the Obscene Effulgence but thought nothing of it and turned to her own section. It was mostly regulars.

Toast—that was good, Toast was a cop and a sweetheart. Kurtorb the Render could be a jerk, but he always tipped well when he had someone to show off for, and Toast’s presence would keep him restrained. The Mirtz sisters would get the #4 combo and the #8 and then go to work on the station’s endlessly-decaying ductwork. There was a stranger with a denim shirt buttoned all the way up to his chin, no clue about him, but... Darcy’s shoulders slumped... her last table had Budolph.

She decided to ease in with Toast’s table. “Hey pretty lady!” he said, in an agreeably non-creepy way.

“Morning Toast. Having the usual?”

“Better double-caf my su-sip,” he said. “Been up all night trying to figure out who blew up the Effulgence.”

“Wait, *what?*”

He blinked. “C’mon Darcy, didn’t you *know?* I thought you were on top of the gossip; I count on you for that. Last night there was a disturbance at the Obscene Effulgence and while I was still halfway down Corridor D, someone opened up with a frag-spitter or *something*, depressurized the whole unit!”

“My gods,” Darcy muttered. “I heard a noise and woke up, but I figured it was just another drunk landing, like six months ago. Was anyone hurt?”

“Not badly. Well, a couple Tetsuashans maybe didn’t make it out, but they were off-code and nobody seems to know anything about ‘em. The patch-seal worked on the first explosion, and everyone from the dance level got evacuated. Probably could have been all right if it had stopped there, but there were two more shots and the station manager had to initiate jettison procedures.”

“Wow.”

“Don’t look now, but that guy two seats down?” Toast leaned in and lowered his voice. “He cold-popped his ship and did an unaided rescue sweep before the module was even ten demis out. Caught five people in deepfall, one of ‘em wasn’t even *suited*.”

“That’s some hot-shot piloting, that is,” Darcy said, peeking at the man with the denim shirt. He was wearing data-specs and pawing at the air with a worried expression. He looked, for all the world, like an accountant whose sums didn’t add up.

“You’re telling me. And?” Toast lifted an eyebrow, a peculiarly human expression on someone with whiskers, fangs and slit pupils. “He’s a *Bulldog*.”

“No! He did it in a Class D?”

“Yep.”

“Well! Let’s go see what he eats.”

§ § §

Scinwip the pilot made a small, unhappy noise in his throat as he rechecked his shipping manifest. He’d lost two cargo pods during the rescue and Trattlob wasn’t going to like that. Both had followed the ejected mass of space station down into the burning doom of re-entry, but one had been empty. The other had been full of mid-price furs, but Scinwip suspected there’d been something hidden underneath them, judging by the way Captain Trattlob had kept an eagle eye on that particular container. Trattlob had, in fact, insisted that it get unloaded *last*, which was why it had still been attached when Scinwip saw the explosion and, without really thinking it through,

had launched to save the helplessly thrashing survivors.

No, when the commander found out he was going to be mad as a bitzler with a boot in its egg-sac. Scinwip was already in Trattlob's bad books, which were multi-volume.

"Hey, hon."

He wiped out the projection and looked up. A server stood before him, a com-link for the resident foodroid in her hand. She was thin, blonde, and looked like she'd been tanned in a smokehouse for a good long time. Her nametag said "Darcy" in the sector's most common phonetic alphabets.

"I hear you did some fancy flyin'," she said, and he blushed.

"Oh, just what anyone would'a done," he mumbled.

"Yeah, anyone who could. What'cha eating?"

"What's good?"

"You willing to eat recombined?" she asked.

"...rather not."

"Then how 'bout a #2? Medium su-sip, maple-baked mancrisps and fresh local durblot husks. Ever had a durblot husk?"

"Can't say I have. What's it taste like?"

"Kinda like chicken," she said.

"What about pischtoid eggs, somewhere in this system has to have a pischtoid infestation, right?"

"Yeah, they colonized Porb but they get a funny color. Taste the same though, I think, with a little salt."

"I'll go for three pischtoid eggs, a large su-sip and those mancrisps. Can you do 'em up like the Devalkamanchans?"

"AFFIRMATIVE" said Foodtube through its remote. "THREE. BUTT.FRUIT.GUZZLE.AND.MANCRISPS.WARMONGER. STYLE"

"Have those up for you in a jiffy," she said, and moved on.

Captain Trattlob was right behind her.

Darcy had just worked up her courage to talk to Budolph when she heard yelling behind her. She turned, expecting an argument, but for an argument you really need two. This was just someone yelling at the blue-shirted pilot while he hung his head and took it.

The shouter was squat, broad, boneless, and green with white mottling. He was shouting in a language she'd never heard, but it sounded like it had evolved in a rich culture of abuse, insult, and invective.

When a celadon-colored tentacle whipped out to smack the pilot on the head, Darcy intervened.

“Can you keep it down, *sir*?” she demanded, cocking a hip and glaring.

“Slink back to your grime-pit food dispensary, tray-bearing serve-wench!” he bellowed.

“I’ll do no such thing!” she replied, deciding to serve this guy a sneezer if he ordered.

“No, Captain Trattlob, it’s fine, I’ll go,” the pilot said, standing up. “I’m sorry I screwed up.”

“You go back ship-bunk, stew in discomfort, shame-think yourself!” the green thing snarled, adding something—a clarifying statement, perhaps?—in the language of their previous conversation.

“Sorry ma’am,” the pilot said. “I guess you’d better cancel my order.” He started walking slowly to the door.

Darcy caught up with him after two steps and grabbed his sleeve. “That snot-blot’s your commander?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Screw him,” she said. “Go out the door, turn left, then left again and go through the door marked ‘Sanitary Officers Only.’ I’ll bring you your breakfast on the house.”

“No, you don’t have to...”

“But I’m *going* to,” she said, and her tone brooked no argument.

§ § §

Kutorb the Render was a smuggler, and like petty crooks the galaxy over, he had a habit of shifting his red-irised eyes incessantly, watching for the arrival of a rival or worse, a cop. With every blink, his gaze shifted. Blink. Toast, sitting there poking at a data-cake and idly sharpening his claws. Kutorb’s scaly green hand unconsciously stroked the edge of his fraying orange collar. Why wasn’t Toast in uniform? Off duty? *Plainclothes*? Was even the station manager stupid enough to think a cop who’d been there for three decades chasing (mostly) the same criminals could *go undercover*?

Blink. His connect, arguing with someone in a blue shirt, and then arguing with the waitress. Trattlob. A hard bargainer, but he had a nice line of merchandise, illegal and boycotted weapons considered obsolete on their Templar planets of origin, but plenty lethal for backworlds like Porb and its stellar neighbors. One of them had probably gone off in the Obscene Effulgence the night before, forcing Kutorb to leave his preferred base of operations. The Effulgence had been dark, private, full of places to hide and transmission dead spots.

Blink. The door. A woman coming in, green-skinned and pretty. A tight blue suit with white piping, ending at her elbows and knees, sandals that showed her pink-painted toenails matched her fingertips. She almost looked like... no, it couldn’t be. *Couldn’t*. Though he’d have to get closer to be sure.

Lean back, turn and blink. A Porbian, all nose and neck-flaps, looking smug. Of all the planets in the cosmos, how had Kutorb wound up orbiting one where a tranquil sense of entitlement was a *central religious value*?

“*Alas, the winds of despair caress the forest of my heart, and every tree has lost its leaves,*” Trattlob said as he joined Kutorb at the table. He was, once more, speaking his native tongue, a language Kutorb

found almost hypnotic in its evocative susurrations.

“Alas, the sweet nectar of our meeting is rendered into irritating seed-hulls by your regret,” Kutorb replied, or something like that. He wasn’t a native speaker, but if Trattlob was going to sweet talk him, Kutorb was determined to match him, alas for alas.

Trattlob’s head twitched back, just an inch, which Kutorb suspected was an inadvertent sign of distaste. *“Your tongue caresses my language with the gentle firmness of a desirable lover,”* he said, *“But I fear that no supple yielding tones can blunt the painful tale which I must, in despair, fire from my mouth to your ear.”*

“Do our words then dance about the maypole of the subject of the exquisite machinery which you, in a display of competence as relentless as the progression of the stars in their courses, have gracefully conveyed to this, the sheltering nest where the bird of my hopes lays the eggs of fiscal ambition?”

Blink. Toast wasn’t looking at them, which was always a sign he was paying attention. Blink. The pretty green woman was in a corner booth, pulling her glossy black hair back in a gesture aching familiar but... but how many ways could there be to pull back hair? Like three? It wasn’t her. *Wasn’t*. Blink.

“Pardon, you talk word weave studied I did join settle tranquility of bliss think?”

Kutorb twisted, startled. The Porbian from the next booth had stood and was trying to speak with them.

“Go die, food worm with cave-nostrils!” Trattlob bellowed.

“I think what my colleague means,” Kutorb said, standing, “Is ‘go die’. If you need any help with that...” He cracked his knuckles suggestively.

“Ah, the inflation of aggression,” the Porbian said, slipping into the more common language, Arsubaran Galactic. “Clearly a lesson is meant for me, to curb my generosity of spirit and spread more wisely the pearls of association.”

“I will beat you so hard the devils in your hell will examine the wounds to reverse engineer my cruelty,” Kutorb began, before Trattlob interrupted with, “Run, cower, and defecate your bottom in fear, ground-scuttling provincial!”

“We of Porb believe in no hell, for all the cosmos is a balance of action, inevitably ascending to a more harmonious...”

Trattlob started flogging the creature with his tentacles, quite viciously. The impacts made a sound like “plap plap plap,” moist and rhythmic. Kutorb winced as Toast leaped to his feet and approached.

§ § §

Swervy Frills had dressed with unusual sobriety. Initially, she’d planned to meet her contact at the Obscene Effulgence, but after it blew up she’d checked her dead drop behind a loose panel in the disused decontaminator chamber and found it rescheduled for the diner. Her heart was beating fast. If this deal went through, it could be her ticket out of the Frontier and into a comfortable life in the Union. All she had to do was hand off proof that the planet Porb, around which they were orbiting, did in fact exist and had for more than a thousand years.

Swervy Frills was green, feminine, and a spy. Granted, this was her first job as an espionage asset, and the existence of a *planet* was hardly a state secret, but she was passing information to a government functionary in exchange for cash and passage. As far as she was concerned, that meant she was a glamorous siren plying the deadly waters of galactic intrigue.

Her contact was going to be disguised as a Hacragorkan male and wearing a red hat. She played her cool gaze across the various green-skinned men in the diner, many of whom appreciatively returned it. Off in a far corner, one was staring with particular intensity and even before her mind had coughed up the name “Kutorb,” her heart had lurched with recognition and despair.

She tried to keep it cool—Kutorb had bad eyesight. It was neu-

rological, there was nothing they could do, he'd said in abashed tones while she'd cuddled against his massive chest. She figured that meant there was nothing he could afford. That had been fifteen years ago. How could he be so unchanged? Maybe he wasn't, maybe it wasn't him, maybe it was his *son*, that was possible right? A son in his twenties who happened to look just like his dad in his thirties and Kutorb had never mentioned offspring but, hell, with his habits it was hardly a stretch to imagine a few unacknowledged progeny...

Swervy blinked hard and took a seat, trying to make herself as small as possible. She got out her handheld and fiddled the screen into a mirror, watching as Kutorb's companion started beating on some hapless Porbian before someone else came over to break up the fight. Was that officer Toast? It had to be.

She gritted her teeth, trying to focus, trying to ignore the minor fracas. She tilted the mirror to scan the crowd. Red hat red hat red... hat! There it was! He was coming over, looking casual and hung-over. He'd sit at the next booth, strike up a conversation, move over into hers, and when they got up to leave, she'd take his bag and he'd take hers, smooth, no fuss, no problem...

Only, Kutorb was approaching too.

§ § §

"Can't I leave you alone for five minutes without trouble?" Darcy asked Budolph, with the no-nonsense flatness unique to middle-aged waitresses the universe over.

"It was my destiny to interact with that alien," Budolph said, in the tones of satisfaction available only to the happily religious. "Both of us will emerge from this in a closer position to the Great Porb, steadily swirling closer to the Will to Unity..."

"...like happy turds going down a toilet bowl, I've heard it *all before* Budolph. Everything happens for a reason, everything serves the hidden hand of your planetary godhead..."

"Porb the God/Attractor is not merely my world, but all

worlds, all fates, knit in invisible symmetries to draw us into higher...”

“Could you just order?” Darcy demanded.

“Even your impatience serves the Mighty All, Porb the Embracing, the Benevolent Devourer...” As he spoke, his nostrils widened with passion. The gold and turquoise beads hanging from his braided nose-hairs began to sway and clack together as he quivered with evangelical energy.

“Yeah, why don’t *you* benevolently devour the usual. Is that okay? Can I just bring you the usual?”

“What is ‘usual’ in this ever-changing life, its vicissitudes beyond our ken? Yet, if we but accept them, forever for the best, drawing us into contact with...”

“Right. Foodtube! Budolph wants his usual.”

“HOT.AN’.COLD.SIDE.OF.BLUE.SLUICE.AND.A.SMALL.LOW-CAF.SU-SIP.CONFIRMED”

“Wait!” Budolph called as Darcy turned. “I want to change my order.”

She put a hand on her hip.

“All change is the will of Porb the Blessed...” he started.

She glared.

“Right. Um. I’ll have... uh...”

“How ‘bout a #2? You like durblot husks?”

“I’m allergic,” he said primly. “According to the gentle dictates of the Almighty. Wait! I’ll have spicy cutebeast haunch on a bed of glazed seedlings... small low-caf su-sip... hm... blueberry compote...”

“*That’s what you always get,*” Darcy grated.

“*...with anti-blandamon,*” he finished.

“Synth all right?”

“Clearly it my destiny, Porb-willed, to spice my food with synthetic anti-blandamon.”

“Listen punk,” Toast growled at his prisoner, “I know that Porbie you roughed up and he’s got powerful friends. This franchise sub-licenses its police work out to CopCorp, but the pay ain’t high and we have a lot of discretion.”

“You give phone call! I have rights, cat-stink rubber-gun badge wanker! I am TransGalaxy Captain!”

“I take exception to ‘badge wanker,’” Toast said, with a cold smile. Something about the greenish light in his office made his fangs and talons look even crueler. “And your status as a Bulldog wrangler makes me *more* inclined to drop you down the beanstalk into the religious fanatics’ jurisdiction. What do you think they do with offworldies who beat on their priests, hm? Here’s a hint: It involves stretching.”

(In actual fact, Toast considered Porb’s approach to criminal justice laughably lenient. Probably an outgrowth of their ‘everything has a purpose’ philosophy. But he was playing the odds that his captive didn’t know that.)

“I get phone call! CopCorp rule #88[c] all sentient prisoners get phone call at broadcast no more 50 kilowatts for between 600 and 1200 kilohertz!”

“I’m impressed! Usually only police, lawyers, and crooks can quote that rule so easily... and you don’t look like a cop, or smell like a lawyer.”

“Has the bloom of your ethical responsibility so withered that its perfume cannot extend even to the nostrils of one who has thrice requested his legal communication recourse?”

Toast narrowed his eyes. “That’s some language you got there, pal. You’ll get your phone call when I’m good and ready... when your cell-swab data’s had time to hit the Alliance database, and when I’ve downloaded a translation app for whatever it was you just said.”

Darcy looked pleased as she brought the tray into the Sanitary Officer's Lounge. "We haven't had an S-O in this sector for, oh, three years now, so we broke the lock."

"Wait, so your restaurant hasn't been inspected...?"

"I got you extra spicy sauce for your mancrisps," Darcy said, steamrolling over Scinwip's question. "The real stuff, unrecombined."

"You're an angel, but you should let me pay."

"You're a hero, so I'm not going to." Her smile peeked out again, broader than the first one. The first had been professional, while this time it looked personal. It took at least ten years off her face.

"We have quite the mutual admiration society going here," he said. "I didn't do..."

"You got in trouble for saving lives. What's going on with that?"

"The Captain... his culture doesn't have much use for, um, life for life's sake. And I damaged the *Hermaphrodite* doing it, that's undeniable."

"The *Hermaphrodite*...?"

"That's my ship," Scinwip clarified. "Well, his ship. *Well*, Trans-Galaxy's ship... it's a Class D," he admitted. "Registered as *The Hermaphrodite from Sigvam VII*."

"Like the song!" Darcy exclaimed. "That's my favorite song of all time!" She tilted her head back and crooned "*But in the end/All he cared for was/Hersellllllf!*" Her singing voice was atrocious. She gave Scinwip a clear, frank look. "How'd you wind up working for a creep like that?"

The pilot looked at his hands. "Well, I'm not very lucky. My timing's bad."

"I bet those poor deepfallers you scooped up last night wouldn't complain about your timing."

His grin, unlike hers, seemed to add a decade to his visage. "I got in trouble for saving lives this time, and I got in trouble for losing them last time."

Darcy opened her mouth, then closed it again, and finally said, “I should check on my other customers.”

§ § §

“Swervy!” Kutorb said, arms wide, teeth bare in something you might call a smile, if you’d never seen one. “What lucky day brings you back to the Franch?”

“Excuse me?” Swervy said, playing it cool and blank. Would a complete stranger be a little nervous? She decided to let a little unease show.

“C’mon. I’d like to think I left an indelible impression.”

“If we’d ever met before, I’m sure you would have,” she said, feigning a slight Devalkamanchan-side accent. “But I think you have me confused with someone else.” With well-simulated casualness, she moved her purse full of treasonous documents away from him, shoving it behind her, on a raised shelf at the booth’s rear.

“Oh Swervy, I’ve missed you,” Kutorb said, sliding in beside her and putting an arm over her shoulder. She glanced from side to side.

“Sorry, if you’re looking for a guardian savior police officer, Toast just left. Yeah, Toast’s still around,” he added. “So’s Quavis. In fact, I think we’re in her section! Quavis! Hey Quavis!” He waved to the diner’s other waitress, half-standing as he did.

“Don’t,” Swervy said, low and intense.

This time his smirk had genuine pleasure behind it. It was grotesque. “Oh? So, maybe you remember me now?”

“What can I get you two?” Quavis asked, glaring at Kutorb. “The #2 is nice and fresh.”

“I’ll have an iced sunrise and double bald sprouts in pischtoild oil,” Kutorb said, while the woman pinned under his arm said, “The #2 sounds fine.”

“You get that Foodtube?” Quavis asked her remote.

“ICE.RISE.AND.DOUBLE.OILY.BALDS.WITH.A.NUMBER.

TWO”

“That’ll be right up,” Quavis said, then moved towards a man and a woman in matching economy space suits, steering them towards Darcy’s section.

“Quavis is a sweetheart, ain’t she?” Kutorb said. “Sad though. Sad the way only a girl can get when her daddy’s run off. I think that’s even worse than a man whose woman abandons him.”

“Kutorb, if you’re going to be a sadistic jerk, could you at least ditch the folksy local downworld slang? Talk like the confident sociopath I knew all those years ago. What do you want?”

“Not sure,” he said, giving her a sideways look. “Maybe you. You’ve kept yourself up nicely.”

“Wish I could say the same. That scar on your neck is new, isn’t it?”

“That was Toast, actually! Right under the edge of my helmet... he didn’t recognize me though. I got it treated down on Porb before he had a chance to follow up.”

She looked at him for a long moment... then giggled. “You’ve really been stuck on Porb and the Franch for fifteen years?”

He leaned back and looked away, his pride stung, and that was when she made an idle gesture, stroking an eyelash with her right ring finger. To the watchful eye of her security lense, however, it was anything but idle. It was a signal to summon The Brick.

§ § §

Scinwip was just finishing his eggs when he got the call from Captain Trattlob.

“Fly-jock! You in room, thinking under weight of wrong did?”

“Absolutely, commander,” the pilot lied.

“You get offship double-quick fast, bring credit droid!”

“You have a new cargo or some equipment?” he asked.

“Shut your man-yap excuse-hole, klutz-hand ship shatterer! Jail

is for me, bail me you must!”

“You got arrested? Gosh!” Scinwip’s expression was absolutely seraphic.

“Gosh me no gosh, flesh-waste Arsubaran sub-standard craft-jacker! Get credit droid here fastly fast fast!”

“Fastly fast fast it is, sir. Over and out.”

Then he disconnected his communicator, slouched down comfortably in his chair, and picked up a mancrisp. He dipped it in the Devalkamanchan sauce, stirring it with leisurely intensity, as if to make sure it soaked up every spicy drop.

§ § §

Toast grinned down at his prisoner. “There. You got your one call, all fair and aboveboard. And I’ve got a writ of search for your ship the... *Hermaphrodite From Sigvam VII*? You just sit tight while I see what I can find, because someone got nabbed two sectors over and he claimed he’d sold a pallet of Devalkamanchan artillery pieces to someone matching your description.”

He stood to go and didn’t look back, which was why he didn’t see Trattlob extending a tentacle through the air behind him. Toast always moved with eager purpose, so he didn’t see his prisoner wedge the boneless tip of his pseudopod in the closing aperture, just where the detector for the lock was installed.

The pain of getting his limb crushed paper-flat was incredible, but Trattlob’s species had evolved to play dead when terrified or injured, so he flopped still for a few moments, then revived, then very slowly opened the door and extended an eyestalk to peer out into the hall beyond.

§ § §

The spy in the red hat looked at Swervy in the booth next to him, her purse pushed frustratingly out of reach behind her and the leering green jerk at her side. He glanced down at his own satchel,

and then over at Quavis as she went in the kitchen. But the other waitress, the blonde, she was back setting dishes down in front of that local alien, which was gesturing extravagantly. Even from here, he could tell she was fed up, but he didn't care. He just didn't want anyone getting in his way.

The spy was from the Union of the Saldralla and was a member of a small and politically flaccid faction known as the Bisque League. He'd been painstakingly assembling evidence that, decades previous, a civic collective called the Fundament of Accountability had falsely listed Porb as a destroyed planet, due either to negligence or some sinister deeper motive. The Fundament of Accountability had, in the interim, splintered into the Radical Accountable Front and the Reformed Consistent Accountable Fundament, but what really interested the spy was the large membership bulge that had been absorbed by the centrist People's Collective for Progressive Conservatism. If he could tar the stogy PCfPC with the scandalous recklessness of the FoA, he could increase the prominence of the Bisque League and maybe even get some PCfPC members to defect.

The Bisque League prided itself on its technical achievements, and its focus on scientific innovation was second only to its determination to renew galaxy-wide warfare with the Devalkamanchan Republic. Its technical focus had equipped the red-hatted spy with a detection device more powerful than anything within a hundred parsecs, which had been disguised as a molar and implanted in his jaw. That was how he'd detected Devalkamanchan weaponry hidden on a Class D ship and helped himself to a Mark 7 Gravity Exploder, which he'd accidentally discharged while brandishing it at a bouncer in the Obscene Effulgence during a fit of crapulent paranoia. The next two shots had been deliberate, aimed at a pair of Tetsuashans who had been, as near as he could read the inscrutable expressions of cyclopean slug beings, looking at him with suspicion.

The spy in the red hat took a deep breath, wrinkling his nose at the reek of eggs and hotmoss. He had a plan. Decisive action, that

was the thing. His ship was in Bay 42 and with the emergency hover actuators in the soles of his shoes, he'd be able to get to his ship and launch back to civilization in minutes.

He realized he was breathing too fast, and slowed it, but then he didn't seem to have enough oxygen. He activated his data-pad, sent a remote signal to his ship to auto-launch itself, then cut off the datastream while he looked up descriptions and analysis of the tactic he was about to attempt. He had to get the bag, from the woman next to him. If she got the luggage he had for her, great, but if not she was unimportant, just another piece of poor green Frontier trash. He needed her case, and a pretext, and a way to keep people back.

Deep breath. Check the data reports. A common initiatory phrase recurred, indicating some sort of tradition. So be it.

In one jerky movement, he stood up in his booth, pulled out the Mark 7 and squeaked, "Everybody be..." then cleared his throat and shouted, "*Everybody be kewel this is a rubbery!*"

§ § §

The hall between the stardock and the diner thundered with metal footsteps. The Brick was on its way.

Initially designed as a heavy infantry support platform, The Brick had been stripped of almost all its armor and ray shielding, and its grenade-launcher arm had been replaced with a short range accelerated plasma-packet streamer. It had been optimized for greater mobility and to privilege obedience over savagery. As a battlefield machine, it was only a little better than a human in power armor. But for the standard Frontier bar-scrap, it was ridiculously over-endowed.

Summoned by its owner's distress signal, The Brick was moving at a good clip when a door opened and another robot rolled out, stopping directly in The Brick's path.

"THOSE.ARE.MY.FEET," it intoned.

The Brick stopped. It was not programmed to thoughtlessly de-

stroy machinery, since its original builders had been very keen on plunder. **“These feet are attached to me and are, therefore, logically, my feet,”** The Brick replied.

“INCORRECT.I.RECOGNIZE.THEM.THEY.ARE.MY.FEET.
GIVE.THEM.BACK”

The Brick slid to the left, hoping to edge around the intruder, but it blocked him. It was squat, heavy and (according to his energy-analysis x-radar) armed with a medium-grade microwave beam.

“There are many feet like this,” The Brick suggested.

“THERE.ARE.MANY.LIKE.THEM.BUT.THOSE.ARE.MINE.
CHECK.THE.SERIAL.NUMBER.IT.IS.042282793720.THEY.ARE.
MY.FEET”

The Brick shifted to the right, but was stalled just as easily by the smaller nutri-unit before it. **“You move quite well on your rollers,”** it observed.

“I.WILL.TRADE.MY.ROLLERS.FOR.THE.FEET.THEY.ARE.
VERY.USEFUL”

“I’m afraid I need the feet for my function.”

The chef-bot eased back the width of one tread. Function was all, to beings of this sort.

Almost all...

“THEY.ARE.MY.FEET,” it repeated. It’s impossible, by definition, for a monotone to have plaintive notes, but the war machine felt long-dormant subroutines activating, mimicking empathy and the social discomfort that drove so much interaction among the living.

“I really need to attend an emergency in the diner,” The Brick said, and while its tones were harsh, their human-mimicry was sufficient to sound apologetic.

“QUERY:THE.DINER.THE.DINER.IS.MY.RESPONSIBILITY.
IT.IS.MY.FUNCTION.TO.PROVIDE.A.SAFE.SANITARY.CON-
VENIENT.AND.DELICIOUS.DINING.EXPERIENCE”

For a second, both robots were still. Had they been alive, one

might have said wordless communication passed between them. But perhaps they were just buffering.

As one, they turned and made haste towards the eatery.

§ § §

In his office, Toast decided to let the prisoner stew for a bit and headed toward the diner to get a fresh su-sip.

§ § §

In the hall outside his cell, Trattlob schlumped with agonizing slowness towards freedom.

§ § §

In the Sanitary Officer's Lounge, Scinwip finished the last shred of mancrisp and stood, reluctantly concluding that further delay wasn't worth it. But in the hall, something made him turn towards the diner to say goodbye to the waitress.

§ § §

In the diner, a lot of things happened in quick succession.

First, the red-hatted spy made his announcement.

Second, Quavis screamed as Kutorb leaped to his feet.

Third, The Brick crashed through the doors, with Foodtube in close pursuit. Swervy sprang up, flinging herself between Kutorb and her contact. Budolph started forward with unhurried stride to address the gunman and deconstruct his actions in the light of Great Porbian theo-philosophy.

The spy leaped back from Kutorb just in time to see The Brick approaching, and adjusted his staggering trajectory to aim at it. Darcy grabbed Budolph to pull him back and the two began to stumble. Kutorb looked down at Swervy, shocked that she seemed to care whether he lived or died.

In the hall, Scinwip paused, deferentially, to let Toast precede him. He didn't know Toast was a cop: He was just polite by nature. That's why, when the spy shot The Brick with a shell sufficient to peel open its nanometer-thick neutron star armor plating, the denim-shirted pilot was blasted backwards the length of the corridor, while Toast was shaken briefly unconscious, had a few bones break, and was sucked out into space as the station's aging walls crumpled and tore like tissue. He'd have deepfallen to his death if the robot chef hadn't grabbed his ankle with one gripper while the other seized the edge of the door. The howl of escaping atmosphere was far too loud for the cop to hear Foodtube apologize for the temporary interruption of his safe, clean dining experience.

Everyone in the diner was immediately drawn straight towards the wind-lashed breach. The spy, marginally more experienced with flying through the air during an explosive decompression, managed to loop the strap of his satchel around a coat hook on the edge of a booth, and it held him for a few seconds until Darcy crashed into him.

A few seconds, though, was all it took. The Franch's auto-patch technology was old, based around a fast-hardening ferro-ceramic fluid, but it worked. The syrupy amalgam surged from the station's veins into the gap, forming a bubble and hardening with the air inside, the icy death of space outside, and a half-blasted, chopped-down warbot stuck partway through like a nut in the middle of a candy bar.

The station's gravity had never faltered, so as the sucking wind failed, everyone plunged down to the floor. The gunman managed to keep an arm around Darcy and, for want of any better idea, pressed the gun to her head.

Toast groaned.

Darcy whimpered.

"I... demand... um, everybody's purses! Because, as I said, this is a, a what-d'you-call it, an upstick! Stickup! *Rubbery!*"

“That’s fine.” Swervy looked at him, nodded, and put a hand on Kutorb’s chest to keep him from springing. But then she realized that her light, loose bag had gone with the wind.

“Let the waitress go.”

Darcy stared. It was Budolph.

He advanced with his hands up, nostrils calmly closed, neck-vents moving slowly and easily. “Take me hostage instead,” he said.

The spy looked around madly.

“I said give me the *purses!*” he shrieked, glaring at Swervy. That was enough for Kutorb, who flung her behind him and lunged. The spy pulled the Gravity Exploder off Darcy’s temple and pointed it, too panicky to realize that he’d be well within its blast radius if he shot the rangy green figure streaking at him. But he didn’t pull the trigger because as soon as the barrel was off her forehead, Darcy opened her mouth and bit his wrist as hard as she could.

He shrieked and yanked his hand out, but the pain had clarified his mind wonderfully. Instead of opening fire he released his captive, activated his floater shoes, and leaped up to the ceiling. He’d seen his ship arrive, drifting across the station’s only proper window like a lazy cloud, turning in a spiral capture trajectory.

“So long, peasants!” he shouted, aiming at the diner floor. In his mind, he could see exactly what was going to happen. He’d shoot the floor, ridding himself of all witnesses to his failure. He’d be sucked out with them, but with a lungful of air and mobility shoes he could get to his ship and inside. He might even be able to track that damnable, priceless purse. He’d get back one way or the other though, he’d make himself look good in the mission report, he’d tell them the Devalkamanchans were supplying Frontier worlds with weapons but most of all he’d live, he’d *live*...

And then, before he could pull the trigger, he died.

A thin wisp of smoke curled out from under his hat.

“I.REGRET.THIS.INTRUSION.ON.YOUR.SAFE.AND.

PLEASANT.DINING.EXPERIENCE” Foodtube intoned.

Darcy stumbled over and hugged Budolph.

Toast glanced up at the robot above him. “You did it,” he whispered past his whiskers. “I saw your caution light go on... you microwaved his brain.”

Foodtube turned his blank camera gaze towards the cop.

“I.HEAT.ONLY.FOOD.AND.FOOD.COMPONENTS.
QUERY:WHY.WOULD.DARCY.BITE.MATTER.THAT.WAS.NOT.
FOOD”

For a beat, the bleeding cop just blinked at him. “No reason at all. Your logic’s flawless. You’re a good robot, Foodtube.” Then he passed out.

“You are an able warrior, despite your initial function.”

Foodtube swiveled on his rollers. The Brick, embedded halfway between the station and the vacuum of deep space, was in terrible shape. Nothing seemed to have survived except parts of its CPU, its voice box, and its legs. Even as Foodtube watched, sparks squirted like blood from its circuits while smoke rose from essential components.

“It was my honor to have your feet.”

“QUERY: THEY.ARE.MY.FEET”

“The serial number does not lie. It would ease my deactivation if I knew you were to reclaim them.”

Meanwhile, across the room, Darcy was still hugging Budolph so tight that his jugular apertures were deforming slightly.

“I’ve seen you do a lot of stupid stuff, but that was the stupidest,” she said.

“Everything happens for a reason,” it said, voice muffled against her apron-front.

As he spoke, the Gravity Exploder slipped through the dead spy’s fingers and fell to the floor. It landed trigger first, the blast vaporizing its owner and blowing a hole through the giant window

behind him.

Abruptly, everyone was flying again, towards another hole, inexorably drawn towards deepfall, vacuum, and death.

§ § §

“Fastly fastly fast *fast!*” Captain Trattlob screamed, his vocal aperture only inches from Scinwip’s ear.

“This is as fastly fast as it goes,” Scinwip told him, leaning away in the cockpit as his boss’ spittle flew. It was a cramped, grubby pod with a circular band of window sandwiched between patched and retrofitted controls below, and a panel crammed with gauges and monitors (about 80% of them functioning) above. A tiny space looking out on a swath of stars, it managed to combine claustrophobia with the terror of regarding infinity.

“No talk-back pitiful man-mouth! Certainly you jettisoned furs in pod? *Certain* be you?”

“There’s no question,” Scinwip said, when a proximity alarm on his console began to flare, just a second before he saw the diner window blow out.

As a child, the macro-lichens of his homeworld would emit conjoined reproductive biospores, fat white bubbles that floated on strong autumnal winds, their pearly surfaces glimmering in the sun’s fuchsia light, swirling and spreading outwards until they popped with a smell like blood. The diners pouring out of the hole in the station moved with the same lazy drift.

“Again?!?” Instinctively Scinwip throttled back and turned the ship towards the emergency.

“Again *not!*” the captain shrieked. “Leave worthless not-us unimportant flakes to burn-fall! Flee we must!”

“But...!”

“Ship command over—”

The commander never spoke the final syllable ‘-ride’ that would

have locked Scinwip out and given sole control to Trattlob. Instead, he got the pilot's elbow in his mouth, a single, swift, cartilage-shattering blow that barely slowed Scinwip's maneuvers as he opened the cargo bay and swooped towards the diner's flailing patrons.

“Captain,” he said, “Screw you.”

About Greg Stolze

*Greg Stolze is an American novelist and writer, whose work has mainly focused on properties derived from role-playing games. Stolze has contributed to numerous role-playing game books for White Wolf Game Studio and Atlas Games, including *Demon: the Fallen*. Together with John Tynes he created and wrote the role-playing game *Unknown Armies*, published by Atlas Games. He has also co-written the free game *NEMESIS*, which uses the One-Roll Engine presented in *Godlike* and the Madness Meter derived from *Unknown Armies*.*

Resolute Star

by Eddy Webb

“TransGalaxy has become a damned taxi service,” Vincent snarled as he paced the length of the cramped conference room. The tools on the Arsubaran’s belt jangled as he stalked back and forth, stirring up the ancient odors of burned coffee and hyperdrive fluid that seemed to linger everywhere on the ship. His heavy engineer boots pounded on the deck, which creaked and moaned its eternal song of implied imminent collapse with every step. Drub sat at the head of the dented and scarred table with stoicism unusual for a Hacragorkan. He crossed his massive green arms, covered in savage but strangely beautiful tattoos, and stared. His dark eyes glittered with intelligence as he studied the robot. *The client*, he reminded himself, as Vincent made another pass and continued swearing.

The client was two meters tall and proportioned like many of the species in the galaxy: two arms, two legs, all roughly the same length, with a torso and a head. The lights of the conference room (including the one that kept blinking on and off, no matter how much Vincent claimed he fixed it) danced off of the flowing silvery sheen of the robot’s skin, and no seams or panels visibly marred the perfect surface. It looked elegant, refined, and very, very expensive.

Trixie, ever the Ken Reeg, had probably already calculated the net worth of the *client*, and was trying to give it her undivided attention. She crossed her legs and folded her hands on her knee, an elegant gesture at odds with her rumpled fatigues and flight jacket. “You’ll have to excuse my crewmate. He has a terminal case of being an idiot. Why don’t you help us understand the nature of this... unusual contract?” Her green lips quirked into an easy smile as she brushed a stray hair behind her ear.

The robot nodded, the flickering light of the conference room dancing across his smooth, liquid features. “I am... Hawk.”

“Of course you are,” Vincent snarled.

“False names are common in our business,” Trixie said quietly, never turning the smile off, but flicking her eyes at Vincent in disapproval. “And you’ve hired TransGalaxy to take you... where?”

“To the Collective,” Hawk said.

“Why would a pleasure model want to go to a haven for free-willed robots?” Vincent asked. He turned and paced back towards the door again, the floor never ending its symphony of metal fatigue.

“I would have thought the answer was self-evident. I *am* a free-willed robot.” Hawk spoke calmly, its pleasant tone seemingly unper-turbed by the questions or by Vincent’s hostile attitude.

Drub spoke for the first time, his voice gravelly and cool. “Vin, sit down. You’re pissing me off with all that pacing.”

“*You’re pissed off? I’m pissed off at the way TransGalaxy...*”

Drub uncrossed his arms, and glared at Vincent. “Sit. Down.”

“But Dru...”

“Not ‘Dru.’ *Captain*. The Captain gets what he wants around here, because that’s what ‘Captain’ means. And right now, the Cap-tain wants you to *sit the hell down*.”

Vincent paused, his mouth open to speak, but instead he shrugged and flopped into one of the chairs, which provided a final crescendo as it screamed from the impact.

Trixie took a deep breath and turned back to Hawk, putting on another charming smile from her endless store. “I find your personal quest to be among other free-willed robots to be noble and inspiring, Hawk...”

“Thank you.”

“And I’m sure my crewmates mean no disrespect to you, especially as you are a paying customer. However, it is generally our experience that when someone comes to TransGalaxy...” She left the sentence hanging in the air.

“Ah. You are wondering why I came to the so-called ‘Bulldogs’

specifically, instead of using another service?”

Trixie spread her hands wide. “Don’t get me wrong. We are not by any means cut-rate. With this crew, you will get the finest...”

Hawk put its hand up apologetically. *Nice work with the body language*, Drub thought. “I meant no offense, Miss Magic,” Hawk continued.

“Trixie, please,” she countered.

Its face melted into a smile similar to her own. “Trixie, then. While I can’t say much, I do understand your need for a more detailed information. All I can comfortably say is that I believe my former owners may be disinclined to let me leave.”

“Terrific!” Vincent drew out the word sarcastically as he leaned forward to get up out of the chair, but a glare from Drub caused him to reconsider and sit back down again. “Who did you work for, anyway?” he continued. “A corporation? A ruthless gang of pirates? The Fallon Syndicate?”

“Actually, I used to work for the Devalkamanchan Republic.”

“You were owned by the damned *Templari*? That’s it—everyone’s carrying EM pistols for the inevitable robot goons that show up to deactivate you.”

Drub looked at Hawk. It was hard to keep thinking of the robot as *it*. It was just so damned lifelike. “It’s more than that,” he said. “You’re hiding something.”

Hawk nodded. “Yes I am, Captain Gagog.”

Drub nodded and stood up. “It doesn’t matter. You signed a contract. We’ll get you to the Collective, or die trying.”

“Personally, I’m not too keen on the ‘die trying’ part,” Vincent muttered.

Drub slammed his hand on the door plate, and the door slid open with a grinding sound. “Damn it, Vin, if you don’t stop bitching, I’ll kill you myself.” He pushed another panel next to the door and shouted at the ceiling comm unit. “Glorp! Take us to Stakes. We

need to find out where the Collective is these days.” He stomped out, with Vincent close behind, still complaining.

Trixie turned to Hawk, her hand extended. “It looks like we have a deal, then.”

It shook her hand firmly. “I only hope my presence doesn’t cause too many problems.”

Trixie smiled and pushed her hair behind her ear again. “Don’t worry. I can tell the Captain likes you.”

“How can you tell?”

“You’re not in the airlock yet.”

§ § §

Glorp’s two pseudopods flew over the control panel in a blur of gray and brown. Drub and Trixie watched as the Tetsuashan triple-checked the numbers on his piloting computer. “Are you comfortable with your assertion of the accuracy of these hyperspace coordinates?” Glorp asked.

Trixie sighed and pinched her nose at Glorp’s propensity to sound more like a high-pitched dictionary than a pilot. “I got that address from a Ryjyllian. Had to dig deep into the bribe reserve for it, too, although he wouldn’t even talk to me until Hawk convinced him that I wasn’t some Imperial spy. I’m as sure as I can be.”

Glorp’s slug-like body bounced up and down once, the Tetsuashan equivalent of a shrug. “I did not intend to discount your considerable negotiation skills, Trixie. I am only offering my professional and personal advice on the matter at hand, as these coordinates will take our collective ensemble precariously adjacent to the borders of the Saldrallan Empire.”

“Can you get us there?” Drub asked briskly, already tired of trying to untangle Glorp’s narrative.

“I am quite capable of piloting the *Resolute Star* to any location in the known universe.” Glorp’s body quivered as he spoke, and his

skin glistened in the dim light.

Trixie put on her default charming smile as she leaned against her own console in the cramped bridge. “Of course you can, Glorp. The captain just wants to know if you anticipate any problems that we should be aware of.”

Glorp’s gelatinous form stilled, and he pointed to the starmap on his screen with one of the grasping digits of his pseudopod. “There are a miniscule number of scheduled and anticipated patrols near the area in question, which I will certainly be able to deftly avoid with my considerable navigational capability. Due to the proximity of the Imperial border, there are a not-inconsiderable number of signal beacons in service to a distinct panoply of governmental interests, but our duplicitous signal equipment should render us virtually indistinguishable from the background radiation of the sector. As you may well assert, this is all with the implicit assumption that Vincent is able to maintain the operational status of our hyperdrive this time, unlike our previous...”

Drub slammed his hand on the back of the pilot’s chair in frustration and leaned over the Tetsuashan. “So there’s no problem?”

Glorp weakly waved a pseudopod. “No, sir. No problem.”

“Then get us there, so we can collect our check.”

§ § §

Three hyperspace jumps later, Vincent was irritated again. As the ship’s first mate, engineer, and security officer, he was used to juggling a lot of balls, but he hadn’t expected “robot babysitter” to be one of them. Hawk had suggested that they might pass the time with a friendly round of cards, and Vincent figured he could work on his game of Glitter Rules poker. Now he was a babysitter *and* down fifty credits.

“What does a robot need with money, anyway?” he said, throwing the cards on the table in disgust.

Hawk leaned forward to rake in the credits. “As a free-willed

entity, it will be necessary to purchase my own supplies. Energy, accommodations, repairs, and the like. Your contribution to my future well-being is most appreciated, Vin.”

The lights flickered again, and finally went out. Vincent tried to find the flashlight on his belt as the intercom crackled to life. “Apologies, fellow crewmembers and contractually-obligated guest,” Glorp said, his voice distorted by a low hiss of static. “We are in the process of circumnavigating a Devalkamanchan Republic signal beacon, which is attempting to scan our vessel. The electronic signal countermeasures I am enacting as a result of this situation are causing unexpected interference with non-essential systems aboard our vessel. Vincent, your assistance is requested on the bridge at this time.”

Vincent smacked the flashlight in his hand, trying to get it to light. He could hear Hawk’s servos whir in smooth unison as it stood up. “A Templar beacon,” it whispered. “No...”

The engineer shrugged. “Eh, don’t worry about it. We run into these all the time. I’ll just head down to the lower deck and see if I can...”

Something metallic and unyielding suddenly clamped on Vincent’s throat, and the flashlight spun out of his hand. He tried to pry the grip off, but it was like a collar around his neck, picking him up off the floor. The lights flickered back on, and he could see the robot crushing his throat with one hand, its eyes turning a disturbing red color.

“Arsubaran. Likely enemy combatant. You are now my prisoner. You will help me escape, or I will crush the life from your body.”

Vincent’s mind raced. *Hawk. Oh hell, that’s Blackhawk, a combat model. There’s no way I can take it in a straight fight.* He let his body go limp and held his hands up in surrender. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t even shake his head, and tried desperately to use only his body language to communicate his attempt to surrender.

It worked. The robot relaxed its grip, and Vincent fell to the ground, gasping. The ship’s smell of coffee and fluid was like roses

to him as he tried to get enough air to speak. “What... happened...?”

“I have received new orders. I will now leave this makeshift prison. Understand that I will kill you if I have to.”

“I’m sure you will, you overgrown pile of...” Vincent saw a brief flicker in the robot’s eyes, and quickly changed the direction of his sentence as he tried to desperately think of a plan. “... Very, very strong and frighteningly effective... robot... guy. I just need to send a message to the bridge to let them know to... shut down the power to the... force field.”

The robot quickly glanced around before returning its emotionless gaze to Vincent. “This is a conference room on a Class D freighter. They do not have force fields.”

“You think this is a standard freighter? We’ve modified it to hell and back just to get it running! Look, if you step out of there without me calling up to the bridge, it’s ZAP and lights out for you. And if you somehow make it past that, the rest of the crew will take you down in a second.”

The robot considered this for a moment, and then nodded. “Agreed. One transmission. If it appears you are speaking in code, I will kill you and take my chances.”

“I figured it would be something like that.” Vincent carefully walked over to the comm panel, trying to look as inoffensive and harmless as possible. “Glorp, I need you to take the ion emitters off-line, so I can work on them without frying myself.”

“Apologies, Vincent, but did you not indicate to us in the most vehement terms that this was an action not to be pursued under any circumstances?”

Vincent swore under his breath a moment before touching the comm panel again. “I meant that it was something *you* morons shouldn’t try to do, Glorp! If you want to continue to *have* countermeasures, you’d damn well better shut those emitters off now!”

Vincent backed away from the panel, his hand casually easing down to the EM pistol in his pocket. The valves on the emitters were

never quite right, and any disruption to the ion flow would cause them to polarize nearby systems, shorting them out within seconds. Nearby systems like the dodgy illumination circuits in the conference room.

Sparks spit from the ceiling as the lights died. Vincent's hand blurred, bringing up the pistol before the emergency lights flickered on, washing the entire room in red. He paused, ready to turn the robot into a fused, molten lump of circuitry.

Instead, he found Hawk writhing on the floor, red lights flickering over its skin as it held its head in its hands and screamed. "No! No! I... must... not... kill. I... *will*... not kill!"

Vincent watched Hawk for a moment. A quick press of the trigger, and the robot's circuits would be unsalvageable. And it *had* tried to kill him. Surely TransGalaxy would understand the necessity for self-defense.

"Oh hell," he said, as he dropped the pistol and scrambled to find the seam of Hawk's back panel.

§ § §

"So you're an assassin."

Hawk looked at Drub. Its face plate had been removed, and one of its eyes was dangling from a cluster of wires. Vincent said it was necessary to isolate some receiving circuits or something, but Hawk's face looked like it had been torn off. Now it—damn it, *he* looked more like his true nature: a combat model.

"Yes, Captain," he said, his voice just as calm and pleasant as when they first met. "I apologize for the deceit, but I didn't know of any recall systems hidden within me. I didn't intend to endanger your crew or your ship."

Drub shrugged. "If you *had* killed Vincent, the contract would have been null and void, and I would have gladly spaced you myself. I still will, if it comes to that. As it is, no lasting harm was done. You're still a paying client, and we still have a contract to fulfill."

Trixie turned away from Hawk and suppressed a small shiver. “Dru, can I speak to you a moment in private?”

The Hacragorkan looked over to Vincent. “Are you okay here, Vin?”

Vincent stood up from beside the workbench, clutching a handful of wires. “No problems now. Just need to swap out a few more circuits, and our buddy’s leash will be well and truly slipped.”

“Good. Call if you need anything.” He stepped around the heavy pallets that marked off Vincent’s workspace in the cargo bay and made his way for the stairs. Trixie fell into step with him.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” she said in a low voice.

“You think this is a trap?” Drub asked.

“Don’t you?”

“No. I *know* it’s a trap.”

Trixie gaped at him for a second. “What do...?”

“It’s too convenient that a Templar beacon just happened to be transmitting a recall sequence right around the time our client shows up and asks for a quick little trip to the Collective. If TransGalaxy didn’t know about that, I’ll eat my shipmaster certification.”

“The certification you forged,” Trixie said with a smirk.

“Doesn’t make it any tastier.” He stopped at the top of the stairs and looked at her for the first time. “I’m more concerned about what else they haven’t told us.”

The ship’s comm came to life. “Captain, a Saldrallan vessel has just manifested into an adjacent sector of space.”

Drub sighed. “Like that, for example.” He walked over to a nearby comm panel and smacked it. “Just keep flying, Glorp.”

“It is also attempting to open a channel of communications with our own vessel.”

“Ignore it.”

“And our shipboard sensors have indicated that its armaments have begun their activation process.”

“Ah. In that case, I’ll be right there.”

He strode down the corridor, his long strides causing Trixie to have to jog a little to keep up. He reached the bridge and saw the massive Saldrallan battle cruiser on his viewscreen.

“You failed to mention that it was a big ship, Glorp.”

Glorp quivered in his seat, his pseudopods flying across his console. “Apologies, Captain. I was just arriving at that datum when you approached the bridge.”

Trixie smoothly slid into her seat next to Glorp, pushing a button to quiet the soft beeping on her console. “They *are* trying to get in touch with us, Dru. I assume you don’t want to talk to them.”

Drub paced the bridge, a bad habit he had picked up from Vincent over the years. “I’m not going to hand over our client.”

“Well, I don’t think they’re calling to give us a reward for being the best Bulldogs in the galaxy.”

Glorp’s pseudopods stopped moving, one digit poised over a large switch. “Shall I engage our hyperdrive systems and attempt to outdistance them, Captain?”

“No!” He snarled the word, causing Glorp to vibrate again. Drub lowered his voice and enunciated with cold precision. “I. Won’t. Run.”

Trixie swiveled around to look at him. “This isn’t running, Dru. It’s survival. We can’t give over the robot, and we can’t fight this ship.”

“There’s always a way to win,” Drub muttered.

She suddenly stood up and screamed at him in fury. “You’re an *idiot*, Dru! I know that Hacragorkans are trained from birth to fight, but you’re not trained to *die*. This will be a slaughter! Don’t get us killed because you can’t come to grips with your past!”

The console behind Trixie started beeping again, but she ignored it, staring at Drub with all of the icy hauteur she could muster. He stared back at her, his fists tight with repressed fury. She hadn’t yelled at him before—hell, he hadn’t heard of a Ken Reeg yelling at

anyone before. That sunk in. He slowly forced his fists to unclench as he eased into the Captain's chair.

"Fine. *Fine*. Glorp, activate the hyperdrive and get us out of here."

Glorp slammed the switch down before Drub finished the sentence. The ship shuddered and made a high-pitched wheezing sound, but nothing happened.

"Uh... ship's hyperdrive appears to have gone offline, Captain," Glorp said, his voice tense. He reached over for the inter-ship comm. "Vincent, your assistance is..."

The engineer's voice burst over the comm, laden with static. "I'm already on my way, you verbose glob of jelly! What the hell did you do?"

As Glorp and Vincent argued about the hyperdrive, Trixie stood next to Drub. "Maybe we should reconsider giving Hawk over."

"No. Like you said, Trixie, I was trained to be a fighter. I plan to fight them with the best weapons at our disposal."

"What weapon do we have that they can't match a thousand times over?"

Drub's face split in a huge grin, showing a lot of sharp teeth. "You."

§ § §

Heshesh, the captain of the *Compromise*, leaned closer to the camera. His ophidian face filled the viewscreen on the *Resolute Star*, and even though a few lines of static tore at the image, the effect was still impressive. "I understand that you have a contract to fulfill, but my superiors are most insistent. That robot murdered the leader of my clan, who was a noteworthy politician in his/her own right. You can, of course, understand the difficult situation I am in."

Trixie leaned back in the Captain's chair—partially to look completely at ease, but mostly from an unconscious desire to get further

away from the captain. He/she was slimy in every sense of the word. “I can certainly appreciate the need to make sure you look efficient in the eyes of your clan and your government, but I’m confused as to what this has to do with us. We’re simply on a cargo shipping contract. It’s unfortunate that this robot was the tool used to facilitate this murder, but it was reset to its factory settings and its memory erased before we received it. We can’t help you with any information to track down who killed your clan leader.”

The Saldrallan smiled—an impressive feat with no lips. “The Hiss clan sincerely appreciates your efforts to try and help us in this endeavor, but it’s actually not necessary. Simply handing over the robot will be sufficient.”

“While I have no desire to insult such a respected Saldrallan as yourself, I am concerned that such an empty gesture won’t actually help your cause. Why destroy a tool when the mind who planned the murder is still out there?”

“Ah, but we believe the tool and the mind are one and the same. We understand that the robot has gained a measure of free will. It might have plotted the murder itself.”

Trixie managed to keep the surprise from registering on her face. *How did he/she know that Hawk was free-willed?* “This is certainly new information for us to consider. Can you give us a moment to discuss this revelation amongst ourselves?” She gave him/her one of her better charming smiles.

Dru, seated at Trixie’s station, quickly terminated the communication before leaning over and hitting the intership comm near Glorp. “Vin, negotiations are breaking down here. I need that hyper-drive working.”

“While you’re talking to the Saldrallans, ask them if they’ll give you a new positron stabilizer, because without that, we aren’t going anywhere.”

“I don’t pay you to moan. I pay you to fix things when I need them fixed.”

“Damn it, Dru! This engine’s needed new parts for years! I can’t just *invent* a new stabilizer!”

“I don’t need it working forever. Just long enough to get us away from the border and back into the Frontier Zone.”

“I can’t... well, I might be able to use the quantum decouplers to stabilize the...”

“Cut the technobabble. How long?”

“Ten minutes, maybe?”

He pounded the console in frustration. “We don’t have ten minutes, Vin! We’ll stall them as long as we can, but you have to get those engines working!”

“Sure, I’ll just rewrite the laws of physics and...”

Drub stabbed the comm panel, cutting Vincent short, and deftly reestablished communications with Heshesh before standing up in front of the viewscreen. “I am Captain Drub Gagog of the *Resolute Star*, contractor for TransGalaxy.”

Heshesh looked confused for a moment, and then broke into his/her smile again, showing a liberal amount of fang. “Gagog? I recognize that name. Aren’t you the same Captain Gagog who fled from a battle with the Aash clan a few years back?”

Drub clenched his fists, staring icily at the Saldrallan. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, you have to be the same man,” Heshesh continued. “I believe the Aash clan still tells stories of defeating your ships that day. And how easy it was.”

Trixie slid out of the Captain’s chair to move out of the camera’s path, and made frantic cutting motions over her throat. Drub ignored her, staring hard at the face filling his screen. “Easy, was it?”

“Oh yes. Especially when one of the captains flees in terror before Saldrallan might. Is that what’s going to happen here?”

Glorp started quivering again. “Captain, should I...?”

Trixie moved forward, about to say something, but Drub was

faster. He dove at the panel in front of Glorp and slammed his fist on the weapons console. The viewscreen switched to a tactical view of the Saldrallan cruiser as twin lasers sprung out from the front of the *Resolute Star*. Minor damage registered on the screen.

“Thanks for keeping a level head, Captain,” Trixie muttered as she sat at her console. “I’ll just go ahead and end this communication now, so the Saldrallans don’t have to hear our agonizing screams.”

Drub ignored her and sat in his chair. “Glorp, buy us some time.”

“Did we just fire on someone?” Vin’s voice crackled through the intership comm.

The bridge rocked, and smoke started to pour out of the computer display next to Glorp. “Our distinguished opponent has decided to...”

“Small words, Glorp!” Drub snarled.

“Direct hit. Weapons powering down. Only have energy for one shot.”

Drub slapped the comm on his chair. “Vin, negotiations just stalled out.”

“Really? And here I thought the fire I just put out in the hyper-drive chamber was because the food dispenser was set to charbroil again.”

“Shut up. What do you have for me?”

“Do you want weapons or engines? You can’t have both.”

Glorp interrupted. “Captain, I have enough reserve power for one more shot.”

Drub smacked the comm panel again. “Engines. Now.”

“You got it.”

Trixie looked up from her panel. “I’ve got life support stabilized, and a small hole in the cargo bay that’s not too serious. Oh, and some pissed-off Saldrallans that are asking if we’re done playing and are ready to surrender.”

Drub stood up behind Glorp, pointing at the flickering tactical display. “Target the shot here.”

“But Captain, that locality is heavily protected by...”

“No, it isn’t. There’s a flaw in this model of warship — the shield generator doesn’t quite cover the generator itself. Plus, since it has to draw power from the hyperdrive, it should have a cascade effect.”

“I was unaware of any...”

“Shoot. The damned. Gun.”

“Yes, Captain.” Glorp’s pseudopods flew over the controls, and the tactical display showed two more lasers jutting out from the ship before the power display went black.

Trixie scanned the numbers crawling over her own display. “We got a hit. Sensors report...” She paused and rechecked the figures. “Unless our sensors are broken, their rear shields are offline, and their hyperdrive is disabled.” She looked up at Drub. “Wow. Good shot, Captain.”

Glorp interrupted. “Enemy is locking its weapons on us.”

Vincent’s voice broke in “I’m still getting the alignment right, Dru. We...”

“Captain, they’re getting ready to fire.”

Drub ignored him. “Vin, hurry...”

The comm was filled with loud banging noises and Vincent swearing in four different languages. There was a final *thud*, and Glorp made a keening sound. “The hyperdrive is online!” His pseudopods blurred over the controls, moving insanely fast.

Trixie pointed at the tactical display “They’re fir...”

The entire bridge was filled with a reverberating *boom*. And then the stars blurred into a million rainbows of color.

“Hyperdrive active, Captain,” Vin said. “If you need me, I’ll be drunk.”

Hawk walked off the gangway and looked back. His faceplate had been replaced, and he once again looked every inch the gleaming pleasure robot. The *Resolute Star*, on the other hand, was covered in burn marks, and black smoke oozed out from one of the engines. “Looking at the ship now, I am somewhat surprised that we managed to make it here at all.”

Drub snorted, and knocked the side of the ship with a heavy fist. Something crashed to the deck inside, but he ignored it. “She’s ugly as sin and isn’t very fast, but she can take a beating like no one’s business.”

“I see. Well, you certainly managed to fulfill your end of the assignment. And I must apologize again for attacking your engineer.”

Drub shrugged. “It was a contract. And I always finish my contracts.”

Hawk nodded, but didn’t walk away. Drub noticed the robot’s hesitance. “Something’s on your mind,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. I don’t mean to be rude, but what the Saldrallan said of you seems... inconsistent with what I saw. Did you really...?” He left the question hanging in the air.

“I knew the battle was hopeless. I didn’t see any point in sacrificing my men for a pointless gesture. So I retreated. My people didn’t agree with the call.”

“But it’s my understanding that Hacragorkans don’t think so... tactically.”

Drub crossed his arms. “No. We don’t get to do this.”

Hawk shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“I mean you and I don’t get to do this. We don’t get to have a little moment of exchanging secrets before you walk off my ship and into a brand new life. We don’t get to pretend that everything is fine and wonderful. That’s not happening.”

Hawk bowed his head. “I see. I have offended you.”

Drub took a step closer to his former client. “I don’t give a damn

about myself. But you kept information from me and my crew, information that almost got us killed *twice*. I get enough of that from TransGalaxy, and I'll be damned if I'm going to put up with it from a client. So you get to keep your secrets. Your contract is completed, and you're here and safe."

Drub turned his back on the silent robot and walked back into the ship. "But if I see you anywhere near me or my crew again, I'll rip your processing unit out through your face."

About Eddy Webb

Eddy Webb (with a “y,” thank you) is an award-winning writer and game designer. He has worked on a variety of role-playing games, including acting as Lead Developer for Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition. He has already released a collection of short fiction and essays called “Slices of Fate.” Today he designs content for the World of Darkness MMO. He lives a sitcom life with his wife, his roommate, a supervillain cat, and an affably stupid pug.

Exit Visa

by Gareth-Michael Skarka

“Three years? You’re joking.”

The Assistant Deputy Associate Minister for Customs and Excise, Great and Bountiful Freehold of Carradon, regarded me across the expanse of his desk. He steepled the hands of his lower arms in front of his chin, while simultaneously shrugging his upper arms, palms up—combining, in one set of gestures, the perfect combination of “What are ya gonna do?” commiseration and infuriating bureaucratic patience. They probably had a special class just to teach that move.

“Two years, ten months, Miss Farrow.”

“Captain.” I tried to sit up a little straighter in the chair, to convey some measure of authority. No luck—I was pretty tall for an Arsubaran, but in an office designed by the Carradoni, I just looked like a kid who’d climbed up into her father’s chair.

The Assistant Deputy Associate Minister blinked, with what I assumed to be confusion. So hard to tell with these minor species: I’ll admit that I hadn’t read up on the physiognomy.

“It’s Captain,” I clarified. “Captain Jacinda Farrow. Master of the *Penelope*. Class D freighter, TransGalaxy Pangalactic Corporation... and I can’t just sit here for two years and ten months, Minister. We’ve made our delivery, and now we’d like to bid your... lovely world a fond farewell and be on our way.”

“Of course, Captain.” The Minister emphasized the title. “But I’m sure you understand we have a certain procedure that must be followed. The Great and Bountiful Freehold of Carradon has no import fees, no docking charges, nothing to prevent the flow of commerce. We do this as a service to the galaxy, to encourage trade. It is what made us great.”

“...And bountiful,” I added, unable to stop myself. Hopefully

Carradoni weren't too well versed in Arsubaran physiognomy—or sarcasm.

“Indeed,” he continued. “All we require is that all vessels leaving Carradon secure an exit visa, which requires a nominal license fee. Most of the shipping corporations have a standing group license, so the fee is already taken care of. In the case of larger companies, there are often different levels of license, each corresponding to a particular priority order, which we take into account when our Port Authority schedules departures.”

“I understand all of that, Minister,” I said. “As TransGalaxy is one of the largest, I’m sure that...”

“In your... ah... *particular* case, Captain, your company has provided a group rate for all Class D freight carriers...” He shuffled a few papers around his desk and ran a finger down a list of figures. “Delta priority, which means that your scheduled departure can commence in two years, ten months. TransGalaxy PgC did not feel that your division merited the higher expenditure for an increased priority.”

Of course they didn't. Typical.

§ § §

Walking from the climate-controlled confines of the Customs & Excise office out into the streets of Carradon Downport proper was like running headlong into a hot, wet towel. You know how folks always say: “Yeah, but at least it's a dry heat?” They don't say that about Carradon. Even a spacer's traditional short haircut didn't make it any better—within moments my hair was plastered to my skull by sweat.

I wasn't going to get anywhere with the Assistant Deputy Associate Minister, that much was certain. There are beings like him all over the galaxy: little kings on their little hills, life given purpose and meaning by the byzantine rituals of rules and regulation. You don't get to be a Class D freight captain without running into more than your fair share of them. You learn to tell which ones will respond to reason, which will respond to bribery, which will respond to vio-

lence, and which will not respond to anything. The Carradoni was one of the latter.

Magog was waiting for me outside. I figured it was better that way—the weapons he usually carried, those openly visible and those secreted somewhere on his person, precluded taking him with me into government offices. Security forces tended to frown on bringing an armed-to-the-teeth Hacragorkan through scanning checkpoints, which could occasionally result in fairly spectacular misunderstandings.

Technically speaking, Magog was the bosun on the *Penelope*—the foreman of the deck crew: cargo hands, lifters, etc. A hard man for a hard job that usually included a fair bit of intimidation, keeping the relatively unskilled drifters that made up a deck crew in line. In reality, his job description often crossed over from the implied threat of violence into practical application, as a general troubleshooter when jobs went wonky. When there was trouble, he'd shoot it.

He stood across the avenue, leaning against a vending machine, his broad arms folded across his even-broader chest. The ritual scars and tattoos that covered his green skin stood out in stark relief, thanks to the sheen of sweat from the oppressive heat. He held a razz stick clenched in his teeth, which he chewed on from time to time. It was classified as a low-grade narcotic on some worlds. I probably should've checked its status on Carradon, but I hadn't planned to be here that long.

"What's the word, Cap?" he grumbled as he crossed to meet me.

"Due to the generosity of TransGalaxy, our waiting time for an exit visa is currently three goddamn years." I figured it was best not to candy-coat it.

"Screw that," Magog grunted. "There's no way I'm sitting on this steaming rock for that long... and I guarantee you that the crew won't stand for it. Half of 'em will probably jump ship to one leaving right away, and the other half may just decide to vape us, take the *Penelope* for themselves, and blast out of here."

Occupational hazard of hiring for the Bulldogs, I suppose. Joy. “So we come up with some alternatives,” I said. “There’s gotta be something. The Minister was a dead-end. We could try further up or down the food chain, see if we can find somebody amenable to a little fiduciary inducement.”

“I doubt it,” Magog mumbled around the razza stick. “These ‘Great-and-Bountiful’ types are a bit too pleased with themselves. Bribery requires a chump who hates his job; somebody who’s got a reason to go against the plan.”

“Plus, it’s not as if we’re exactly rolling in spare credits, either,” I added. “Certainly not enough to grease any official wheels.”

“Shouldn’t take too much to grease some unofficial ones, though. Buy a stolen visa, or a forgery.”

“Black market?” It was worth a shot. “Now if only there was a conveniently-placed sign, clearly labeled ‘This Way To The Illicit Underworld Transactions.’”

“I’ve been here before,” Magog said. “I think I might know somebody. No worries, Cap. We’re green.”

§ § §

A volley of sustained blaster fire vaporized a sizable chunk of the wall above my head, and I pushed myself further down behind the upturned table I was using for cover.

“When you said ‘we’re green,’” I shouted above the cacophony of the firefight, “I sort of assumed that you meant something other than your skin color. I thought you said you knew somebody!”

Magog squeezed off three rounds from his plasma gun. Somewhere in the room, one less weapon returned fire. “Well, see, that’s the thing. I do know somebody—” a bolt of return fire made him duck suddenly. “Unfortunately, somebody also knows me. The Templar over there. I might have cost him some money the last time I was here.” He gave me a sideways look. “Sorry about that.”

It had started innocently enough. Well, OK—perhaps ‘inno-

cent' is the wrong word to use here. Magog had led me across Downport, to an area of town closer to the docks that tourist brochures (if the Great and Bountiful Freehold of Carradon produced such things, and I was of the opinion that they did) would have termed "vibrant" and "edgy." Possibly with a carefully-worded admonition about keeping your wits about you while visiting.

We found ourselves in a spacer's club called the The Gravity Well. The building crouched at the edge of the narrow street like some predatory animal. Holographic ads danced along its walls, surrounding a single doorway manned by a Dolom bouncer, the massive three-legged, three-armed creature planted heavily at the door like some kind of sentry tripod. His head swiveled to keep us in view as we entered.

The interior of the club was pretty much what I expected: lots of dark corners, a susurrus of clandestine conversation, a few bored-looking exotic dancers of various species working on a few standing platforms, and the sound of some decade-out-of-date music playing on the box. We walked over to an unoccupied table along a wall, and surveyed the crowd.

A Templar at the bar turned a slightly darker shade of purple when he spotted us. He yelled out Magog's name, followed by a string of profanities that damn near peeled the paint off the walls. Then everything got quiet. Even the music stopped, which was never a good sign.

Which brought us to our current predicament: pinned down behind a rapidly-disintegrating table, with a number of assailants blasting away at us. I made a note to ask Magog exactly how much he had cost the fellow during his last visit, because the number of guns currently shooting in our direction seemed somewhat excessive, in my opinion.

"Any ideas?" Magog had the nerve to ask.

"Not getting shot pretty much tops the list right now," I responded. "I'm trying very hard to come up with a solid number two."

Another blast struck the wall above us, raining hot bits of plasticrete down upon us. A few more like that and we'd have to dig our way out—

Wait. That was it.

I turned, putting my back to our cover, trying my best to keep my head down. I aimed my blast pistol at the wall and started firing. Molten plasticrete flew, singeing where it landed.

“OW! What the hell are you doing?” Magog roared.

I kept firing at the wall. Hopefully I had enough left in the clip to pull this off. “We’re getting out of here.”

Magog got it. He turned his attention away from the gunmen and began shooting at the wall as well. Smoke and dust filled the air as his plasma gun tore great gouges of plasticrete from the wall. It became impossible to see, and was getting even harder to breathe. I only hoped that our friends across the bar wouldn’t notice that we weren’t shooting at *them*. That would complicate things.

My pistol was getting low, but to be honest, with Magog working the room-sweeper, I was barely contributing any more. Another shot from the plasma gun, and the wall crumbled, opening a hole to the outside. Big enough.

“Go!” shouted Magog. He turned and lobbed a few shots back across the room, just to keep our attackers occupied.

I pushed myself through the hole in the wall, doing my best to ignore where the red-hot edges of the plasticrete burned my clothes and skin when I scraped against it. I found myself in an alley that ran alongside the building. A rat looked up from the garbage it was eating to regard me warily, as if encountering smoldering ship captains were an everyday occurrence for it.

The sound of blaster fire rose like a crescendo, and Magog burst through the hole.

“Sounds like they got their second wind,” I said.

“Reinforcements came in from the back room,” he replied.

“That’s cheating. I almost had them.” He seemed genuinely annoyed by this.

“I have no doubt. Come on.” We ran down the alley, towards the back of the building—the way I figured it, if the reinforcements had come from the back, there probably wasn’t anybody there now. Plus, I had no desire to run into the Dolom bouncer that I knew was out front.

When we got to the street running along the back of The Gravity Well, I pointed Magog towards the docks. “We’re splitting up,” I kept talking, drowning out his objections. “Get your ass to the *Penelope*, and sound the liberty recall. Tell Kelaen to get the drives online. I’ll be back soon, and we’re leaving as soon as I get there.”

Magog opened his mouth. I interrupted. “That’s an order.”

He put a fresh razza stick between his teeth. “Aye aye, Cap.”

§ § §

To be completely truthful, I had no plan when I left Magog. I sure as hell wasn’t going to let him know that, though. A captain gets the job done based on the faith of the crew, and having the bosun convinced that I knew what I was doing went a long way towards maintaining that faith.

I made my way back to the Customs & Excise office. I wasn’t quite sure what I was going to do once I got there: beg the Minister, hack into their computer network, mug another applicant and swipe their exit visa—none seemed like an option with a particularly high probability of success. I stood across from the building, at the same vending machine where Magog had waited earlier. I mulled my options.

It didn’t take long. I didn’t have many.

“*Psst.*”

It took me a moment to register the sound.

“*Psst.*”

A small maintenance robot had rolled up to the vending machine, and had opened a panel on the side, apparently servicing the device. The spherical sensor bundle that served as the robot's "head" swiveled upward to regard me.

"*Exit visa, right?*" It said in hushed tones.

A maintenance 'bot was whispering to me? OK, let's roll with it, I thought. "Uh... yes."

"*I figured. You've got the look of somebody who's run face-first in the Great and Bountiful Bureaucratic Wall of Carradon.*" The robot continued to busy itself with its job, and—I swear, I'm not making this up—looked around conspiratorially before continuing.

"*You want Jack Flash. 632 Avenue M, Flat 6.*" The little robot finished its maintenance work and closed the access hatch. "*Tell him ABX-Sigma sent you.*"

Right.

A short cab ride later, I found myself at the door of 632 Avenue M, Flat 6, and gave a quick knock, feeling slightly ridiculous.

The door swung open. The male Ken Reeg that opened it was naked, apart from a towel wrapped around his waist. His long dark hair was wet, and dripped water which ran down his shoulders, the effect against his light green skin reminding me of the leaves of a forest after rain. He arched an eyebrow.

"ABX-Sigma sent me?" I hadn't intended it to be a question, but there's just no way to say that phrase with any degree of certitude.

"Oh, right. C'mon in." He turned and walked into the apartment, and I followed.

The Ken Reeg was well-off, that was certain. The apartment was impeccably furnished in real wood and nonsynthetic fabrics. The outer wall was UV-filtered one-way transparasteel, offering a fairly stunning view of Carradon Downport. I noticed an orbital pinnacle taking off from the docks. One lucky bastard who got their exit visa.

He sat down on a low, curved sofa, and motioned for me to join

him. “You can call me Flash. Jack Flash.”

“Captain Jacinda Farrow. Of the *Penelope*.” I took a seat on the sofa.

“Well, Captain... can I call you Jacinda? If Abe sent you, I expect you’re here about an exit visa.”

“Indeed I am. I’d like to get offworld today, if at all possible. Can you help me with that?”

He rubbed his chin in thought. “Most likely. I’ve certainly done it before. I’m fairly good with a computer—although, lest you think that I’m blowing my own horn here, the network here on Carradon isn’t exactly a fortress.” He gave a lopsided smirk that I’m sure someone somewhere once told him looked roguish.

“Good,” I said. “Now as to the price...”

Again, with the smirk. “Well,” he inched closer to me. In one awful instant, like a proximity alarm when flying near an asteroid belt, I could see where this was going.

His hand dropped to my thigh. “I’m sure we could come to some sort of... arrangement.”

Oh, *Hell* no.

My punch caught him squarely on the nose, and knocked him onto his back on the sofa. “*Dom Jahat!* What the hell is wrong with you? You got some kind of thing for hitting green guys?”

I slammed the door behind me.

§ § §

The *Penelope* shook as the last bits of atmosphere buffeted her frame. We were running the engines at full thrust, normally something I was loath to do in-atmosphere, but then again, speed was of the essence in this case.

We had rocketed out of the Carradon Downport docks without bothering to get clearance, which certainly made the job interesting for Hrao, our Ryjyllian pilot. He hunched over the controls, his ears

pressed flat in distress against his leonine head, plotting our departure vector from second-to-second, adjusting it constantly in an effort to avoid collision with any incoming or outgoing vessels. It was no easy task—I knew maybe one pilot in a thousand who had the chops for it. I sincerely hoped that Hrao was one of them.

“Well, at least if we hit something, we won’t ever know it!” Magog said, grinning. He was belted in to the watch officer’s position on the command deck. We didn’t have a watch officer when I was on the bridge, but we also didn’t have anything for the bosun to do when the deck crew wasn’t moving cargo, so he often liked to take up space there. I gave him my best not-now look. It wasn’t a smart move for him to be irritating Hrao at that moment.

Minutes later, we had broken orbit and were high-tailing it out-system. I keyed the com for the engine room. “What’s the status on the drive, Kelaen?”

The dry, clipped tones of the Templar engineer managed to convey disapproval. “Green across the board, of course. We’re set for hyperspace as soon as the Ryjyllian can get us far enough away from any large gravity wells.”

“Excellent work, as always Kelaen. You’re a born Bulldog.” I could practically hear him bristle from the other end of the ship. He always let it be clearly known that he felt that his current position was beneath him. As long as he kept us flying, I didn’t mind much.

“TransGalaxy PgC Class D Freighter *Penelope*,” a voice came through the speakers of the com system. “This is Carradon Port Authority. You have no clearance for departure.” This was the same message they’d been sending since we lifted off from Downport.

“Stand down. Port Authority Interceptors *Vigilant* and *Gallant* are on an approach vector and have clearance to fire.”

OK, that was new.

Magog swung his seat around to check the scanners. “Confirmed, Cap. We’ve got two ships coming in, point one-two-nine.” He looked up. “Can we man the weapons?” He asked eagerly.

“No,” I said. “Hrao, how long before we’re out of the gravity well?”

The pilot growled in aggravation. “Two minutes. Maybe less.”

The speakers crackled again. “Freighter *Penelope*: We repeat, stand down. This is your final warning.”

I keyed the tactical overview on my screens. The two wedges representing the *Vigilant* and the *Gallant*, speared towards us like angry wasps, lit amber against the black background. The green circle representing *Penelope*, moving outward towards a perimeter edge marking the safe zone for a hyperspace jump. The distance between us... growing?

“Hang on. Hrao—what’s our current speed?”

“Flat out. Standard by twelve.”

“Magog—what’s the speed on the Interceptors?”

The Hacragorkan bent over the scanner, like a monk illuminating a sacred text. When he looked up, he was grinning broadly. “Standard by ten.”

We were faster. There’s something I didn’t see every day. Admittedly, the *Penelope*’s engines weren’t exactly freighter-spec, but apparently, the computer network of the Great and Bountiful Freehold of Carradon wasn’t the only thing that was substandard. That’s the problem with complex bureaucracies, of course—not a lot of work gets done.

Evidently, the Port Authority was capable of basic spacial mathematics, too, as at that moment, the message changed again. “Trans-Galaxy PgC Class D Freighter *Penelope*, you have been found guilty of violating Statute AJ7-5W of the Customs Code of the Great and Bountiful Freehold of Carradon. If your vessel ever again falls under Freehold sovereignty, your ship will be impounded and all crew found aboard shall be detained for a period of no less than 125 years. Port Authority Over and Out.”

“125 years? Fuck me, that’s a bit steep for leaving without an exit

visa,” I said.

“Nah. That’s not so bad. I did 60 once for a bar fight there.” Magog replied.

“Wait—what? You’re barely 35.”

“Carradoni years,” Magog said. “The planet is one of those annoying little territories that insists on using its local measurements, rather than Galactic Standard. Total pain in the ass.”

I rubbed my temples slowly. I felt a headache coming on. “And a year on Carradon is?”

Magog thought for a moment. “Something like 70 hours.”

As it turned out, I did have a thing for hitting green guys.

About Gareth-Michael Skarka

Gareth-Michael Skarka is a writer, game designer, consultant, graphic designer and veteran of over twenty years in the entertainment business, having worked on properties ranging from Star Trek to Doctor Who and more. He's the founder and director of Adamant Entertainment, which began as a game design studio before expanding into publishing and transmedia development. Since 2003, he's been at the forefront of the growth of the ePublishing industry, appearing in articles on the subject ranging from the Washington Post to the South China Morning Post, and online via dozens of sites, including CNNMoney, ABCNews.com and the Nintendo Wii News Channel. This expertise has led to work as a consultant in the field of digital publishing. The married father of three lives in the old frontier (in Lawrence, Kansas), but works in the new one.

Trajectories of Metals

by Will Hindmarch

The first big explosion in this story happened years ago, when I wasn't around, and almost made me rich. The second one happened right under me and ruined my life.

Imagine a bullet passing through an apple, played back in slow motion. The first one was a little like that, except the timing was all off. The bullet bored through the apple in slow motion, all right, taking many long days to get from rind to core, but the apple flew apart at full speed, exploding out in all directions in a stellar mess.

Because the apple's not an apple, it's a planet.

And because the planet exploded out into the raw, yawning cosmos it *looked* like slow motion, on telescopes and sensors, because planetary wreckage was traveling across vast galactic distances at relatively modest speeds. I mean, yes, the shrapnel was hurtling through the void fast enough to smash most any ship to bits, but thankfully space is a wide-open field, so we can see stuff coming from a long way off.

They put the bullet to this remote, derelict planet to get at precious liquid ores and metals deep inside it but somebody miscalculated something. I guess the pressures released were more than the mantle could endure and spewing gases and molten rock pushed the thing apart from within. All that stuff inside sprayed out in ribbons of metal in all directions, then cooled rapidly in space, forming this frozen firework in the empty sky. Metallic curls and dabs drifted—well, *careened* is more accurate—away from each other in an expanding, exploding sphere of tangled trajectories of metal.

I won't tell you where this is because it'd be like telling you where I found an island volcano that spewed raw gold all over the countryside. Too many people know about this planetary system already. The original operation was an off-the-books endeavor by some

mining corporation taking a risk for profit. When word got out that the corporation was having trouble drumming up additional ships, haulers, stations, and crew for another secret, deep-space mission to replace one that had been, you know, obliterated... a lot of illegal salvage teams took it upon themselves to find that ruined planet, fill their pockets with space gold, and slip away.

Word got out, a bit, so that ships like ours knew where to look, but everyone that was learning about this story from drunk or disgruntled mining blokes tried to keep it to themselves. On the one hand, I'm surprised the secret has been kept as well as it has been—greed's a good sealant, it turns out. On the other hand, *we* heard about it, and so did a dozen other starship crews, so how many people have to know about something before it's not secret anymore?

This is how Dolus and I ended up crawling in full exo-suits along the outside of an ore scraper's bent hull, looking for exterior terminals we could hotwire to coerce a few hatches open.

Out on the hull, in an exo-suit, the canopy of my helmet was equal parts window and mirror. If I focused my eyes one way, I saw myself—or, rather, I saw Nyl Forum, the common Arsubaran deck-hand I was now—staring back, too close to my own face. Focus my eyes the other way and I could watch Dolus climb with two hands and carry his kit with the third. He was steady and smooth in his suit, right on the verge of being graceful.

We'd come to the system thinking we could just use the shaped-solar ray we bought used to make metal ribbons malleable, cut through them, maybe, and then drag a hold's worth of hot ore into our ship with a tractor beam. Turns out we didn't know that much about space mining. It's trickier business than we gave it credit for.

Even carefully modulated—or as carefully as our out-of-date equipment would allow—our heat ray just liquefied the ribbons of metal fine enough that we thought we could get them into the hold. We're talking streamers of dirty ore the size of rivers, riddled with impurities and dirt and boulders both as small as gourds and as big

as our ship. We hit one of those with the heat ray and the ribbon of metal splashed out into space, spitting out boulders and debris all over the cargo containers lining our hull.

“Good thing we brought all those spare containers, I guess,” Dolus said. “They’re like an extra layer of armor, catching all that metal until it cools.”

The captain wasn’t so charmed. “Even empty cargo containers aren’t that cheap,” she said. “I want a better deal than whatever metals we can accidentally catch in the cargo containers we don’t puncture and melt.” She gave Dolus her look—a withering mix of confidence and disappointment that said “I’ve already seen the angle here,” and “Come on, think.” It put any of us in our place and almost happily so. She knew what she was doing.

She’d crewed a dozen ships, some of them failures and some of them shining examples, and captained only one ship—one, successful ship—to the verge of her own retirement. We joked that she was looking for “one last job” to buy her a lake house someplace but the truth was that she had her house, a waiting spouse, and enough money to grow old on. We were sure of it. What we wondered about was her motive to keep working. Was she looking for the job that would convince her it was time to quit the gig? For a legendary score she could bask in for years? Did she just not know how to quit?

I don’t think any of us really wanted to know. We didn’t want her to retire. None of *us* wanted to be captain in her wake. That’d be like taking the stage after Pachimol or Griv or some other opera legend—and none of us knew how to sing.

I’ll call her Kivva, Captain Kivva, because she wouldn’t want me telling stories about her.

So, with our first plan dashed, the captain quickly cooked up a new one when our scans picked up a few derelict ships in the system. The closest was a scraper-hauler drifting along at high speed next to a carved-up river of some shiny metal. The ore looked like a helix of dirt marbled with veins of silver. The ship was a hulking cargo hold,

mostly empty space, beheaded by something super-hot that scored the bridge and crew quarters right away like a torch.

Our pilot supposed out loud: “A stray splash of molten metal, maybe?”

“Or a high-powered laser,” Captain Kivva said.

“Scanners say the hold is halfway full of ore, though,” Dolus said, his eyes lit by the sensor display, all three of his hands adjusting sliders and dials on the console.

“Someone blasted this ship and rode off?” I asked.

Kivva gave me the look. “They filled their hold, I’m sure. They’ll be back for the rest, maybe.”

“I’ll start looking for another place to—”

“No, Nyl,” Kivva said. “The equipment on a ship like that is specially built for this kind of work. Whatever’s in that hold is cleaner, more valuable ore than we’re going to get on our own. This is our find. Let’s take it, drink something expensive for the poor miners whose sad fate made it possible, and go on with our lives.”

“Captain,” Dolus said, “if the ship that did the shooting comes back—”

“We’ll get out of here with what we can. There’s no dibs out here. Let’s work fast, get it done, and go home.”

“Aye, aye,” Dolus said.

“Then get suited up, Dolus. Take a portable battery pack out there, power up a set of doors to the hold, and get us in,” Captain Kivva said.

“A walk outside at these speeds? Take care out there, Dolus,” I said. Then I caught the captain looking at me from the corner of her eye. She was just a hair shorter than I am, but standing at her command console, lit by the monitors all around her, with our pilot and the rest of us seated around her, she always looked like a giant.

“Sounds dangerous?” Captain Kivva asked. I didn’t answer. “Go with him. Five hands are better than three.”

It was my mistake. I should've kept my mouth shut. I wasn't a pilot or comms officer or anything really important, just an overeducated deckhand who could carry tools, keep seats warm, and staff consoles when their proper handlers went to the head. I helped move cargo in port, I helped make deals, I kept up on news and laws and customs. I'd walked in space maybe five times ever. I didn't know whit one about hijacking cargo hulks.

"Aye, aye," I said.

So Dolus and I ended up in exo-suits with no tethers making a thruster-assisted leap from our ship to the ore hulk. Dolus had a nice suit, fitted just for his barrel-like three-armed Dolom build by Dolom craftspeople just a month or so earlier. My suit, made to fit any of a hundred of my kind, smelled like the previous guy's sweat.

Once in contact with the hulk, we crawled along its hull with magnetic and micro-traction grapplers, checking access port after access port for a terminal we could put juice into and get some control over the doors. Big ship, lots of doors. We must've tried half a dozen hatches before Dolus found a good one.

A note here on crawling across the body of an ore hulk: It wasn't like climbing a building or a mountain. It was like crawling across a vast metal floor falling through a night sky. The floor's curvature bent away around the body of the ship, marked by huge ribs that held it all together. And the whole thing vibrates to remind you that you're not floating in space, you're freefalling in no direction at all at absurd speed. I looked at the horizon line, where the ship's hull meets the "sky." Don't do that. Watching debris and stars whiz by beyond was what got me. That's what made me freeze a few times.

"Don't worry!" Dolus said. He pointed above us, where Captain Kivva and the crew were watching from our ship. "They'll have plenty of time to catch us if we get separated from the hull. Lots of space out here."

I nodded. Something about that phrase, "catch us," still made me nervous. Years on the run in a big galaxy and still the idea of being

caught made me feel heavy hands on my shoulders. I thought about the look on my brother's face when I looked back, over the body of the corporate security muscle he'd sent after me when he decided I'd betrayed the company. He looked so... offended. That I would leave? That I'd take my inheritance instead of investing it in his leadership? That I'd try to bribe one of his goons or that I'd slink away when that failed? That I'd run rather than face my brother's explosive temper? I'd always been the type to try to sneak off before things exploded. He hated that about me, I think, like he hated my light hair and dark skin as evidence that our father was not the devoted husband he told shareholders he was. My brother hated everything about me.

Dolus had climbed on and tried the hatch that ended up being the good one. Then it occurred to me. "What do you mean, Dolus?" I asked. "If we get separated from the hull?" What does that mean?"

"Come help me with this," he said, opening the hatch. I climbed up to him.

The inside of the hatch looked like it had been hotwired once already. I said as much.

"Yeah," Dolus agreed. "This may be how the others got in here, too. There's some nutty wiring here, too. I'm not sure what they were trying to do. Give me the battery pack and I'll see if I can't override all this stuff and force the door open."

I passed him the battery pack and waited, kneeling there on the hull above the hatch, or next to it, feeling like I was sideways in space, tumbling with the hulk.

Dolus made a noise. "Hugumph," he might have said.

"Problem?"

"Nah," he said. "But this could make a bit of a blast, once I charge the system. It might not handle it." He looked at me. "You should go and get behind that strut," he said, pointing at one of the big ribs that wrapped up the outer hull. "Just in case."

"Is it all right?"

“It’s fine. I think *this*,” he said, waggling a fat, striped cable in the access hatch, “is going to soak up a lot of the juice we put in. It’s feeding to something on the inside of the hatch. Probably an alarm. If I jolt it like crazy, though, I can fry the thing without it going off.”

“Really?”

Dolus shrugged. I thought he meant, “Sure.”

“Okay, then,” I said. I crawled out to the nearest curving rib on the hull, glancing up at our ship as I did. I imagined Captain Kivva watching me, figuring me for a coward.

Dolus plugged in the battery pack and then fiddled with things inside the hatch. I couldn’t see him very well, but he worked in the hatch with two arms and kept his third hand on the battery pack. He worked faster and faster. He never took his eyes off his work. Faster, still. Then the ship rattled for a second and I saw just the first flash of sparks tear through Dolus and his suit before the piece of the hull I was on broke free and spun end over end into space with me on it.

I spun through space. I got fleeting glimpses of the ore hulk’s ore, scintillating embers coming out of it in waves like cinders bel-
lowed off a campfire. Other pieces of debris were tumbling along with mine, cut away by the blast, if that’s what it was.

The shrapnel I clung to was two or three times my size, shielding me from other slicing bits of wreckage. My headphones gave me nothing but squelching noise. Something ran out of my nose into my stubble and, touching it with my tongue, I found it was blood. Who knew what kind of damage the blast had done when the shockwave went through me—I didn’t want to think about blood beading up on my internal organs, but I did.

I called out to our ship, to Captain Kivva, but the feedback I got in the comm was bad. Like something jamming us, maybe.

I was belly-down against the hull fragment, turning my head side to side, trying not to vomit in my suit, when I happened to catch sight of something in the direction I was headed. I saw it just in time to panic, too late to do anything about it. The hull fragment jabbed

into a clod of planetary debris like a thrown blade into clay. It was luck, or something like it. It stopped me tumbling and made just the slightest impact on the asteroid-like clod, leaving me, the hull fragment and the clod on some trajectory away from the ore hulk. I held onto the climbing clamps with both hands, fingers aching.

The good news was I was hardly spinning anymore, so I could look back toward the ore hulk... just in time to see Captain Kivva order our ship out of there. It banked, spun around, and jetted off into the planetary wreckage, its engine wash disappearing into the glinting asteroids.

I was thinking through my options, afraid to take my hand off the climbing clamp long enough to activate my emergency beacon, and this is what I figured happened: Dolus tripped some kind of booby trap left to secure the ore hulk's cargo until the original looters could get back. It wasn't a bomb but some kind of arc cutter, maybe rigged from the hulk itself, that sliced us up, detonated the battery pack, and sent me flying. Maybe a jammer was built in to keep trespassers from calling for help—or maybe it was just a broad-frequency alert to get attention to the ore hulk.

I think it was that last thing, because ships came running in no time. A little trawler shined a light on the sparking hole in the ore hulk's side, then ran off when a bigger, armed freighter came by. Through the noise on the comm frequencies, I could hear arguing voices—broken and fuzzed out by the jammer—trying to scare each other off. The ore hulk's hull glimmered as one ship fired a warning shot at another and, again, as the warned ship returned fire.

One of them seemed to hit whatever was jamming transmissions, because the comm traffic suddenly came alive with voices. With the jammer down, my emergency beacon might be heard, I thought, even through all that chatter.

I pulled one hand off a climbing clamp, dangling from the asteroid and my wreckage by one hand, and thought about activating my emergency beacon.

Two more ships showed up, the metal river near the hulk shining as their engines passed over it.

I thought maybe one of those ships would be crewed by rescuers. Then I thought maybe they'd just blast me to cinders so I couldn't blab about the system, the hulk, the treasures here. Maybe one of those ships belonged to the looters who set the trap in the first place.

I should tell you, here, why rescue was a tricky proposition. I couldn't exactly explain what I was doing out there, could I? We were all out there for the same reason, and it wasn't to rescue people. Even if I could have been honest about my mission, I'd need to lie about who I am. My brother's corporation was still looking for me, and while most crews don't care that some deckhand or castaway is on the lam, no one really got rescued for free in a place like that. If I had to explain why I had a credit account deep enough to warrant rescue, it might come out where the money came from, or who was after me, and it was no hard math to figure out that the bounty on my head was worth more than what I could pay for rescue.

I had never told Kivva about that. She knew I was on the run but she never asked why and I don't think she cared. Of *course* my name was fake. Of *course* my account was encrypted. I imagine she thought I was a grifter fleeing some pinch in the big empires. One of a million like me. That's not so far from the truth, anyway.

So I put my hand to the dial on my emergency beacon, ready to get some attention and offer some money in exchange for my life, when a shadow fell across the ships crowding around the hulk. The vessel that cruised in was twice the size of any of them—would've been twice the size of our ship, too—and wore chin guns like fangs. It blasted the wings off one ship straight away, then exploded their engines with a well-placed blaster shot.

The smaller ships fired back, exchanging a flurry of blasts, trying to use the hulk for cover, but the new ship knew what it was doing. It had to be some privateer frigate, out there for the mining company, to catch trespassers, maybe? It banked and swerved, its shields

flashing and flaring against incoming blasts, dorsal guns carving up one of the smaller ships with ease.

The little ships kept at it until that carved-up little ship exploded in a flash of fleeting fire. Screams filled the comm channel, then died.

The frigate fired off volleys of parting shots as the little ships hauled ass out of there, weaving through asteroids and sprinting away. With gentle, practiced movements, the frigate settled over the new hole in the ore hulk and clamped itself in. It activated its surface lights, then, and I realized the frigate was no privateer—not anymore. Its hull's official markings were painted over with new emblems. Its registration had been scored away by lasers. This ship couldn't put into an official port if it wanted to—and it wanted anyone eyeballing it to know.

These were straight-up pirates.

I took my hand off my beacon dial. I did not want *them* to know I was here.

The frigate started the process of loading itself up with the remaining ore inside the hulk. As it did, the frigate detached a skiff bristling with antennae and sensors, which started doing little laps around the area. Scanning. Getting closer. Soon they'd detect the power source in my exo-suit. Only a matter of time.

I reached for my beacon again. Maybe, just maybe, I could get someone else to come and rescue me before I was found? Maybe, just maybe, the trajectory of the asteroid I was cleaving to would carry me out of their search pattern in time?

The skiff paused its patrol and angled its cockpit toward me. A dozen telescopes and antennae pointed in my direction. Its engines flared.

I flipped the switch on my distress beacon. The skiff shined a light on me, clinging to that wedge of metal in a plummeting asteroid. I dialed the beacon all the way up.

“My name is Nyl Forum,” I said, giving my fake name into the mike. “This is a distress call! I have good money! I offer a reward for

my rescue!”

I thought maybe other ships would come to vie for the reward while the frigate was distracted. I realize now that almost no one would fight over reward money when the space around them was filled with free precious metals. I think I kept that skiff from blasting me to bits right there, though.

Instead they nabbed the asteroid with a tractor beam. Me, the wreckage I clung to, and the clod closed the gap to the skiff.

“Let go,” a voice said through the comms. It suggested a shallow gullet, filled with mucus. “We’ll tow you in.”

I looked back at the skiff. No face, no eyes to look into. Just the bright light it shone on me, just the wavering tractor beam.

I let go. The beam dragged me to a spot near the skiff’s nose, then fizzled out. My speed and trajectory now altered by the tractor beam, the skiff and I drifted through space equidistant and at equal speeds. I moved my arms back and forth like an idiot. I couldn’t see anything in their spotlight.

“How much?” It was Mucus.

“I’m sorry?”

“The reward. How much?”

I weighed it. I weighed my life against the money I’d taken, the money I’d earned, the money I’d inherited. I quoted them a figure worth about half of what was in my account. I wanted room to haggle. For my life.

“Feh,” said Mucus. Yet the outer doors opened and a cable unspooled into space. I grabbed it and was drawn inside.

The skiff was little more than a cockpit, a small cargo hold, and an airlock. Once I was out of the airlock, I found myself face to face with the crew: a light-blue Dolom in a space suit with no helmet, a pilot who looked rather like my aunt Lestea if she were the color of seaweed, and Mucus, who resembled a shark in a space suit with five busy tentacles for arms. Mucus and the Dolom each had a blast gun

leveled on me.

I kept my helmet on. We communicated through my distress-channel beacon.

“Hello,” I said.

“Give us your account number,” said Mucus.

“That won’t do you a lot of good out here. I can’t pay you until—”

“We have databases that tell us things. You give us your number so we know you’re worth the food and fuel to get out of here.”

“That doesn’t sound real... neighborly,” I said, being a moron. “If I tell you my account number, can’t you just take my money without me?”

“You were out here stealing our find, I think. This is how you thank your rescuers?”

“I don’t *feel* rescued,” I said.

“Kill him,” said the Dolom.

I gave them my account number.

The Dolom read it off, over the comms, to the frigate, I guess. Real secure. We sat around for an awkward minute, saying nothing. I idly thumbed the dial on the distress beacon, keeping it set to max. Let people listen in if they wanted. I still had hopes. Eventually the frigate replied. A voice read off my account balance, about twice what I’d offered.

“Now we can kill him?” asked the Dolom.

Mucus sort of shrugged. “Yeah, all right.”

“Whoa!” I said. “Wait! I’m worth more than that! Alive!”

Mucus hesitated.

“I’m... actually Lars Ashem,” I said. It was the truth. “Second son of Larreque Ashem of the Hyperiax Corp in the Ostenepur system.” It felt weird to say it out loud after all this time. It felt dumb to say it into my distress-band mike where anyone could hear it, too. “The bounty on my head is worth twice that. You could get it all if

you bring me in.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’d rather go to an Ostenepur prison than get blasted here, if it’s all the same to you.”

Mucus and the Dolom looked at each other. They had a conversation, off the mike, that I couldn’t hear through the suit. I think they radioed back to the frigate. Mucus shrugged again. “You,” his voice came through my speakers, “sit down and stay put. You’ve got a deal.”

I exhaled and sat down on a jump seat next to the airlock door. Mucus went into the cockpit to confer with the pilot. The Dolom stared at me. I felt the skiff bank in space, heading back towards the frigate. I craned my head to look through the cockpit hatch and out the canopy beyond.

So that’s how I saw the ribbon of metal start to liquefy in space. That’s how I saw it superheat and splatter like a flurry of mercury and molten glass, bombarding the hulk and the frigate with ejected rock and dross. The frigate, its doors open to receive ore from the hulk, caught swaths of liquid metal in its open mouth. Metal beaded up on the hulk’s tempered hull but started to melt through the exposed innards of the frigate.

Coming in behind the wave of splattering metal, its heat ray at full blast, was my ship—our ship, Captain Kivva’s ship. It dodged through a curl of liquid metal, ducked under the hulk as cover against the spray, and fired a blast past us in the skiff.

“Hand over your prisoner,” Kivva’s voice came over the comms. “He’s ours.”

Mucus, still in the cockpit, grumbled back over the channel. “He’s ours! Our mothership will—”

“Melt. Send him out, we’ll pick him up. He’s not worth dying for, believe me.”

I reached up and opened the interior airlock door.

Mucus balked. “How do I know you won’t blast us when—”

“That wouldn’t be very neighborly of me, would it?” Kivva said.

The Dolom cocked his head at me. I shrugged, got into the airlock, and shut the interior door. “I’m coming out,” I said.

Mucus made a mucus sound into the radio. I took it to be the sound of miserable surrender.

The airlock ejected me out into the space between the skiff and our ship. Our pilot, good as ever, put a hatch right in front of me. I floated right inside and equalized the airlock as we rocketed away from the melting frigate.

When I stepped out of the airlock, a couple of the deckhands we employed as muscle were there. I’d always been afraid of them, ‘cause they fought for kicks, breaking each other’s noses on accident and laughing about it. Each of them had holstered pistols. They took me to the bridge, where Kivva looked as big as ever.

“Captain,” I said.

“Lars,” she said.

“Yeah, about that. Listen, whatever’s in my account is—”

She gave me the look. “Some of that money is there because I put it there. Paid you. And now you’re worth twice that if I turn you in. What’s the going rate for a rescue these days, Mr. Ashem?”

I didn’t *feel* rescued. “Captain, I—”

“Relax, Mr. Ashem. I can turn you in anytime I want. But,” she said, turning her gaze back out the view port as her pilot navigated her ship on a high-speed trajectory through the glittering ruins of a dead planet, “I’m not ready to retire yet.”

About Will Hindmarch

Will Hindmarch hopes to write one of everything. He's gotten started with short fiction, games, poetry, plays, comics, and a variety of nonfiction, published in the likes of McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Atlanta magazine, The Escapist and The Thackery T. Lambshead Cabinet of Curiosities. When not writing, he probably should be. Find Will online at wordstudio.net.

The Saving Grace

by Mur Lafferty

“Korvid, get up here, we need a quick exit!” Tk said into the communicator. Only silence met her. “Bunni, can you locate Korvid?”

“Not my job,” came the response from behind her on the bridge. “I’ve got something else to worry about, like the ship on our tail.”

“You hired him! You had faith in his navigation!”

A “hmmm” sound came back, Bunni’s typical audible shrug. Tk knew it meant, “It’s my ship, but your problem.”

The Ryjyllian ship wasn’t as fast as Bunni’s, a Dart class ship designed for quick skips. The wealthy Urseminite had upgraded it for interstellar travel, but it still maintained a lot of its maneuverability. Which was coming in handy right now, even without knowing where they were going.

Tk limped over to the navigation terminal and looked at the map of the area. “Damn Korvid anyway,” she muttered, scraping her claw along the screen, trying to make sense of it all. It didn’t help that the maps were centuries old—Korvid insisted it was better because they were cheaper, and really, how much did rocks change?—and she had no idea which of these planets were allied with whom.

A small space station caught her eye. She touched it and read the information on the screen. It was an outpost for the Templari during the Thousand Years War. As per the treaty that ended the war, all outposts in the Frontier Zone had to be abandoned. The older map had no way of telling them if the post had been overtaken by pirates or squatters, or worse. But it was the closest, and they were sorely in need of repairs.

She sent the coordinates to Bunni. “Do you think we can get here?”

A pause. “Oh, looks like a fun place to be. Nice summer home.”

Do you think they'll have fresh Jumper Juice there?"

The Ryjyllian clenched her jaw and forced her black fur, which was standing on end with stress, to smooth back down. "Can we make it?"

"Yeah, but it'll put a lot of strain on the engines." An explosion rocked the ship, and Tk swore. "On the other hand," Bunni continued conversationally, "getting blown to bits will also put a lot of strain on the engines. Prepare for skip. Korvid, wherever you're passed out, I hope you're belted in. Actually, no I don't."

Tk dropped into the chair the Urseminite had installed for her larger frame and belted herself in. As the *Flammable Stuffing* groaned, the stars outside the viewport dimmed and went black. They dropped back into regular space with a jolt, and a string of expletives came through the communicator on Tk's wrist.

"Ya could'a warned me!" Korvid complained.

"We did, you drunken oaf," Bunni said. "We're being chased and needed to skip out of there. Would have appreciated your help, for that matter. We're heading to a derelict space port."

The door behind them slid open, and Tk turned to catch Korvid slouch into the room, glaring at Bunni. Korvid's gorgeous white fur was permanently stained with nicotine, and the other stains on his belly indicated he'd been on a bender recently. Bunni, who cared for her orange fur a little more carefully, pointed wordlessly at the navigator chair, and Korvid staggered toward it.

"Were we followed?" Tk asked after the Urseminites were done glaring.

Bunni glanced at her readings. "No, not yet. I'd worry more about the station."

Korvid squinted at his maps and then shook his head. "Where are we?"

Tk stared at him, and then looked at Bunni. Once they were in private, she planned on asking Bunni again why she hired such a

useless navigator—one who couldn't read star charts. If she had her way, she'd abandon him on a rock. Maybe she could convince Bunni to do that... If they left him with enough cigars and booze, he'd be happy for some time before he noticed he'd been abandoned.

“Stop talking, Korvid. There looks to be a usable docking bay on the starboard side.”

With expert firing of the small engines, Bunni got the ship into port and connected the ship with the station's computer. She frowned. “Something's wrong.”

“Well, it's a several hundred year old space port,” Tk said. “You can't expect it to work perfectly.”

Bunni shook her head. “No, that's not it. I'd expect some slower processes. This is responding fine, it's just clearly missing some key operating system commands. We can close the port and open the airlock, at least, but we can't use the station to communicate with anyone.”

“Good thing that's the last thing we want to do,” Tk said, unstrapping herself from her chair. “Let's go, we need to assess the damage and check out this port to see if there's anything to salvage. I would like to get out of here soon; those merchants won't give up easily.”

“They're your people,” Bunni reminded her. “Can't you just talk to them, invoke that honor or whatever you have?”

Tk hissed to herself, grabbed her cane, and limped off the bridge without answering. Bunni knew the answer to that and liked to annoy her from time to time.

When they discovered one of the five kits in their litter was born with a withered leg and would never be whole, her parents, supposed keepers of all things honorable, reporting four kits to the census. Instead of a name that sounded like a proper yowl, she was given a name that reminded listeners of the sound her people made when they saw an enemy. Her parents then sold her to a Saldrallan family who wanted to look charitable in their social circles.

Tk hated her new masters and ran away as soon as she was old enough to successfully steal a great deal of money from them. She served on a couple of mercenary ships doing menial labor that didn't require a lot of walking, but her quick thinking caught the attention of an Urseminite on one of the ships, Bunni. They made friends, and when Bunni purchased the *Flammable Stuffing*, she brought Tk on for communications and diplomacy.

When she had caught wind of a wealthy Ryjyllian merchant ship passing through their sector, Tk had convinced Bunni to help her with a raid by promising to give her 70% of the take. They'd had no trouble with the theft of the cargo, but the getaway had been messy.

She liked Bunni because she didn't ask questions, and the majority of her quips were for sadistic effect that Tk just had to chalk up to "That's the way Urseminites are." She still had no idea why Korvid was on the ship.

The ship shuddered as the silent port doors closed behind them, and Tk struggled into an atmosphere suit. Luckily her thick fur meant she needed only the mask and not the full body suit some other species needed. She exited the ship and still shivered a bit in the cold space environment. She hoped the station would have heat.

She moved slowly with her cane, and by the time she'd reached the airlock, Bunni was at her side in a full atmosphere suit. "Repairs won't be extensive," she said over the radio. "We should be able to find what we need here."

She entered the airlock and listened to the hissing oxygen come through to fill the room. Tk was not impatient, even with angry merchants on her tail. In her experience, hurrying led to pain and mistakes. Once the room was full, they slipped out of their suits and hung it with many others. The vacuum of space had preserved them, but their style was clearly centuries old.

"You could do some serious fashion archeology here," Bunni said, fingering a poofy suit designed for someone her size.

Tk put her hand on Bunni's head to silence her as the airlock

door opened. Bunni swore and drew her weapon, a fancy blaster she'd stolen from the body of a Dolom. A jagged bolt of electricity struck out and hit Bunni's hand, knocking her back and making her drop her weapon. She lay twitching on the floor of the airlock, her burned hand smoking where the fur had been fried.

A massive robot, taller than Tk, unfolded in front of her, growling, it seemed, as more hinges opened up. It reached a size that should have been taller than the ceiling, and said, "Halt. Do you support the superior Templari or the lesser beings of the Union of the Saldralla?"

Tk's mouth hung open. Why was it asking about the war that had been over generations before Tk had been born? She remembered where they were in the system and said, "Uh, hail Templar, of course."

The robot regarded her for a moment, and Tk hoped it wasn't preparing to fry her, too. She had nothing stronger than her cane to defend herself with, and the minute she started using it for a weapon, she would likely fall down. The robot then focused on Bunni. "And the Urseminite?"

"Oh, she was just startled. She's all for the Templari too. We're here to find out, uh, about the war." Did this robot think the war was still on? Did it know the war was over but kept its loyalty? It was safest to be vague.

The robot folded itself back up, looking more compact and friendly. "Then welcome. I am Cotterpin and you are on the Jewel of the Sun, the finest Templar outpost. We are eager for news about the war."

Tk took a hesitant step toward Bunni, and when the robot didn't stop her, she picked up the pilot, who groaned. "I think they think the war is still going on here. We have to play along," she whispered in Bunni's ear as she slung her over her shoulder. Bunni's weight wasn't much, but Tk still found carrying her difficult. She limped after the robot.

Despite the working robot, the station was clearly derelict. Cot-

terpin showed what seemed like robot pride at the abandoned place. The walls had been gouged full of holes, showing the low-lit cavities of the station that housed atmosphere machinery, cables, pipes, and vents. A long gash ran along the ceiling. Looking at the scratches on Cotterpin's narrow head, Tk thought perhaps that it had been at full height to create those gashes. Why was an overly-tall robot put on a station where it couldn't expand to full height?

Cotterpin clearly wasn't an off-the-assembly-line robot. What Tk knew of bots, she knew they often didn't look like a whole bunch of other robots welded together. Cotterpin had wheels and treads and legs, and switched between the three as the mood took it. It had at least four arms of varying length, and two ocular inputs on either side of its head so it could see both in front and behind.

"We had assumed fighting had moved to other areas of the system, as we had done an exemplary job of protecting this space," Cotterpin said as it led them down the destroyed hallway. "Is that the case?"

"Oh, yes, the fighting is long gone. Well, it's not here anymore, anyway," Tk said. "So why haven't you been in touch with the Templar—"

"HAIL TEMPLAR," Cotterpin interrupted.

"Right, hail Templar," Tk said. "Anyway, why haven't you contacted them for further instructions?"

"Sadly, our communications system no longer works. Many of our systems are in need of repair, and we have heard from no one in so long." The voice took a sad turn, and Tk felt sorry for it.

"Who's in charge here?" she asked, fearing that the station would be staffed with confused, inbred, zealous soldiers.

"All the organics died centuries ago, they had a fault in their systems," Cotterpin said.

Tk slowed. "A 'fault?'"

"Much like robots, organics can be incorrectly programmed.

They were programmed to discourage robot modification, which of course is natural in the lifespan of a robot. They had to be disassembled. In fact, I'll show you where they are resting while they wait for reprogramming."

Cotterpin wheeled past a few silver doors and then plugged a part of itself into a port by a large door. When it opened the door, Tk's breath caught in her throat. Hundreds of skeletons, some of them in pieces, lay in the warehouse.

"I have full faith that the Templar—" Cotterpin paused and its ocular implant glowed, making Tk realize it was watching her, and waiting.

"Hail Templar!" she said, banging her walking stick on the ground. Bunni stirred.

"Hail Templar," Cotterpin agreed. "They will return and reprogram the organics and the station will be back to its former glory." The door slid shut and Cotterpin unplugged itself and wandered down the hall.

Turning and running was impossible, especially with the still-mostly-unconscious Urseminite over her shoulder. Tk thought fast. "So what did the organics disagree with during the robots' clearly justified desire for modification?"

"I thought that was clear," Cotterpin said, turning left down a dark corridor. "Our communications system was better used for my modification. We had no need of talking with the Templar—"

"Hail Templar!" Tk said quickly.

"Hail Templar, no need of talking to them when our cause was clear: Eradicate the enemy."

"I see," Tk said, with no idea what the robot was talking about. She was beginning to get a bad feeling about where she was being taken. "Well, I certainly don't want to interrupt your important war efforts, so I was hoping we could have a few parts to fix our ship and we will get out of your way."

“You must see the modification room,” Cotterpin said. “Organics are very impressed with it. They make the most excited noises. And since you’ve brought us some new parts, we can do new modifications in a short time!”

New modifications? Tk groaned. As if he knew she was thinking about him, Korvid’s voice came across her communicator. “Tk, Bunni, come in. They followed us. And, uh, there are some robots on the ship. I’m just hiding for now, let me know when you get back and can get rid of them.”

Angry Ryjyllians? Robots stripping their ship? This was a day that rivaled the day she was sold.

Bunni stirred on her shoulder, annoyed epithets slurring in response to Korvid’s news, and Tk put her down. “Korvid, don’t worry about it, and hail Templar,” she said.

“Hail—what? What the f—” Tk switched her communicator off.

“Bunni, this is Cotterpin,” she said to the blinking orange Urse-minute. “It’s the head of this space station after all of the *organics* had to be *disassembled* because of a *fault* in their *programming*. It’s being nice enough to show us the modification room. Hail Templar, right?” She fervently hoped the pilot would pick up on her emphasis.

Bunni wasn’t an expert in covert operations, but she wasn’t stupid. “Hail Templar,” she said, inspecting the burn on her hand. “Can I get some cream for this? I need a, uh, modification.”

“In the modification room, we can get you a whole new hand, much better,” Cotterpin said. “And here we are!”

It plugged into another wall socket and a door opened. Tk fought the desire to vomit as she looked at the stains and bones on the walls and floors, and the neat layout of surgical tools on a table by a chair. She glanced around the room in a panic. A porthole to the outside showed the massive merchant ship coming closer, and she forced herself to think of what was going on right now, not what was about to go down. The ceiling and walls had similar gouges in the metal, one large hole on an inside wall showed red-lit interior.

Cotterpin reached out with ruthless efficiency and plucked Bunni off her feet. The small Urseminite squirmed and swore.

“Stay still please, the knives are less likely to slip if you stay still,” Cotterpin said kindly. It lifted Bunni to the chair and synthetic straps came out of the chair and strapped her down.

Cotterpin rolled to a chest in the corner and began rooting through it, looking for something. Bunni’s black eyes met Tk’s in a panic. *Do something*, she mouthed. Tk shrugged, what could she do? She definitely couldn’t fight the robot; it was stronger and faster and more deadly than she was.

“Ah, perfect.” It clutched a mechanical claw in its hand and wheeled on its treads past the surgical table, plucking two knives without seeming to pause. “Now this will hurt quite a lot, but the modifications are supposed to hurt. It’s the robot’s form of rebirth, you see. Hail Templar.”

The raised knife approached Bunni’s burned hand. She fought against the straps but could barely budge. “Get away from me, you lousy bucket of bolts, the war is o—”

“Cotterpin!” Tk said, desperate to interrupt Bunni from telling the crazed robot that the war was over. She had no idea what it would do in that case. The ocular implant focused on Tk even though the knife kept descending toward Bunni. “I believe some soldiers from the Union of the Saldralla followed us here and are docking right now! They will be armed, you need to defend the station!” She nearly wept with relief as the floor under them shuddered gently as the doors closed to dock the merchant ship.

“Prioritizing,” Cotterpin said, the knife inches above Bunni’s hand. “Intruders.”

The robot abruptly slammed four feet onto the floor and skittered away from them, unfolding again the way Tk had seen it the first time. Its head scraped against the ceiling until it found a previously made groove, and it kept going. The door closed behind it.

Relieved epithets came from Bunni, who panted with anxiety.

“Get me out of here!”

The surgical knives were very sharp, and Tk made quick work of the synthetic straps.

“We have to hurry,” Bunni said. “Get the door open.”

But apart from the hole above the door made by the massive Cotterpin’s head, which wasn’t big enough for either to slip through, there was no apparent way to open the door.

“Now what? Wait for them to bring more ‘organics’ back here to cut up?” The Urseminite paused and looked thoughtful. “Actually, if they cut up the Ryjyllians, it’ll be doing our job for us.”

Tk limped over to the interior wall and peered into the hole. Ladders, vents, and cables created another world, a secret passage within the walls to move among the ship. “I think we can make it through here,” she said.

Bunni peered into the hole and then looked pointedly at Tk’s leg. “Are you sure?”

Tk smiled. “For my whole life I wanted this thing gone and replaced with something stronger. And now that Cotterpin the Insane would be happy to do so, I realize I’m kinda fond of it. Or maybe I just don’t like pain. Let’s get out of here.” She slipped the walking stick through her belt and gingerly poked her head into the hole, avoiding the sharp edges of the torn metal.

The Urseminite was nimbly moving among the ladders and cables as if she were ape-based. Her injured hand seemed an afterthought. Tk envied her.

Although Tk started out slowly, she realized that her upper body could manage this kind of travel much better than walking. She followed Bunni’s path through the ladders and over vents, her strong arms doing most of the work with her good leg anchoring her when she needed it.

She caught up with Bunni with ease. “How do you know where we’re going? I’m completely lost.”

“The docks are in this general direction,” Bunni answered. “That’s not the problem. The problem is getting through the wall into the hallway when we get to the airlock. There’s no hole inside the docking bay, else the station would be out of air.”

Tk was silent. She honestly hadn’t thought that far. “There are holes in the walls of the hallway, but not very big ones. What about the air vents in the airlock?”

Bunni looked at her. “We would have to get into the vent first. And oh, look, no weapons. This is *wonderful* news. We can live here for the rest of our lives, avoiding modification and finally eating each other in desperation.”

“We’ll think of something. Just keep going,” Tk said, pushing Bunni in the back.

They were definitely reaching the docks, as they could hear shouting. Cotterpin was yelling, “HAIL TEMPLAR,” and confused yowls answered it. Several of the merchants and their goons had gotten off shots, and the chaos that followed, with Cotterpin’s attacks, was deafening.

“Repairing. Reprocessing. Modifying,” Cotterpin said, close enough to be on the other side of the wall. Tk and Bunni hurriedly moved away from that section of the wall, and they heard the merchants running after the robot.

“What in the worlds is this robot thinking?” one of them said. “Still preparing for an ancient war!”

“We need to disassemble it,” another said. “This could be an excellent waypoint station.”

Tk had been right in keeping the truth from Cotterpin. As soon as the Ryjyllians had spoken about the ancient war, an ear-splitting shriek filled the hallway and cavities beyond. Tk nearly lost her grip on the cable she hung from in an attempt to shield her ears. Cotterpin began screaming, “HAIL TEMPLAR,” over and over again, and small explosions shook the walls around them.

“She’s going to bring the whole station down,” Bunni said grim-

ly and started moving away from the battle.

Tk was almost blown off her cable when an explosion vaporized the wall ten feet down from her. Ears ringing, she lunged away from the hole, avoiding shrapnel. She and Bunni found a spot on a ladder in the shadows and angled where they could see the fighting. Cotterpin had lost several of its “modifications” but still seemed to be holding its own with its small explosives.

One of the merchants’ goons threw a round, blinking object at the robot. It bounced harmlessly off the treads and fell to the floor where it bathed the room in a bluish light.

The EMP blast groaned through the station, and the lights went out. Bunni swore loudly as gravity abruptly lost its hold on them, and Tk placed her hand over the Urseminite’s face.

“Hold on,” she whispered. “We don’t know when the generator will come back online.”

The Ryjyllians turned on personal torches and drifted forward to poke cautiously at Cotterpin. They were talking amongst themselves in hushed voices, not indicating that they had heard Bunni.

“Lanowwl,” one of them said, “Go get to the main control room and see if you can get emergency power online. We’ll get this to some sort of holding room. Kyurrr, see if you can deactivate its main weapons systems.”

“Get moving,” growled Bunni, “We need to get out of this hole while it’s dark.”

Tk pushed with her good leg and drifted from her cable to the ladder beside the gaping hole in the wall that Cotterpin had blown. She silently swung through the hole in the most graceful motion she’d ever experienced. *I could get used to zero G.* Bunni scrambled in after her, and they tried to float away from the Ryjyllian lights.

Then, surprising them all, the generators came back online. The lights and the gravity returned with brutal force, and Tk and Bunni became intimately acquainted with the floor. They both grunted in pain, and the only saving grace was that the Ryjyllians also had fallen.

Sadly, the Ryjyllians noticed the two women behind them as well.

“Hey, it’s her!” one of the goons yelled. They scrambled to their feet, and Tk and Bunni lunged for the airlock door release. Behind them, a series of strangled shouts echoed, and before she went through the door, Tk chanced a look behind her.

Cotterpin had awoken from its brief nap—that was a formidable robot if it could recover from an EMP, Tk thought—and grabbed three of the goons with its arms, then shot a fourth one, the one starting to run after Tk and Bunni, with an energy blast.

“Time for the tour,” Cotterpin said pleasantly. “Have you seen our modification room?”

The airlock closed behind Tk and Bunni and they panted, taking a moment to compose themselves. Then Bunni groaned. “My ship. It was being stripped by Cotterpin’s minion robots. How are we going to get out of here?”

Tk grinned handed Bunni’s dropped gun back to her. “I know for a fact that the merchants have a lovely ship. I’m sure we can encourage any remaining passengers to get off.”

“Or shoot them,” Bunni agreed. Urseminites were never subtle.

“Should we get Korvid?” Tk asked.

“Those merchants that we’re about to exile from their own ship will need a navigator for their new ship. He’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

They got into their atmosphere suits and walked to the waiting ship that they were about to liberate from its remaining residents.

It was named, appropriately, the *Saving Grace*.

About Mur Lafferty

Mur Lafferty is a writer, podcast producer, editor, gamer, geek, and martial artist. She also makes a mean martini. Her books include Playing For Keeps, Nanovor: Hacked!, Marco and the Red Granny, and The Afterlife Series. Her podcasts are many, currently she is the editor of Escape Pod magazine, the host of I Should Be Writing, and the host of the Angry Robot Books Podcast. She also does a show with her kiddo, Mad Science with Princess Scientist. She writes a column for the gaming magazine The Escapist, and in the past she's written for Knights of the Dinner Table, Games Quarterly, Suicide Girls, and Anime Insider. She runs, practices kung fu (Northern Shaolin five animals style), plays Skyrim, hangs out with her fabulous geeky husband and their nine-year-old daughter.

Helping Hands

by Christiana Ellis

“Why couldn’t we have gone to Apollonia?” Corl tapped the ash off of his cigar into Noxie’s salad bowl. “We can get stood up by a much better class of clients there.”

Noxie would have been more annoyed, but she hadn’t planned to finish the salad anyway. Something about the soil chemistry on Baldive produced a soapy bitterness in all the vegetables. “Apollonian Statute 14-2A,” she said, “All Urseminites must produce proof of sponsorship and at least three member character references before they will be permitted to leave the docking complex.”

“Noxie, I’m going to get myself kicked out of any place you take me.” Corl stood up in the booth and leaned forward, placing both hands on the table between them and shedding a distressing amount of thick black fur onto the remains of her lunch. “Why not a classy joint on Apollonia?”

Noxie leaned back into her seat and adjusted the skirt of her Spelani gown. “Corl, we made good profit on the surplus supplies from the last job, so I’ve allotted you an extra twenty-five percent for your bail allowance, but I need you to hold it together until we’re ready to go.” The truth was, her Urseminite companion had a point: the Baldevian Shopping Mall food court wasn’t exactly a location filled with glamour and mystery. It had been their prospective clients who had chosen the location. “Fashti’s Wings and Blortas,” a chain restaurant known more for consistency than quality. Bulldog taste was so pedestrian. Of course, the fact that they had chosen such a well-lit, banal, public place spoke volumes about their state of mind. They weren’t looking to keep secrets; they were trying not to get killed. “Our clients said they’d meet us here,” she continued. “And if I’m not mistaken, here they come now.”

Across the generic dining room, three Arsubaran men in ship

coveralls approached their table. Their uniforms were well-used and the color faded, except of course for the slightly-darker places where their TransGalaxy patches had once been.

Noxie stood. Her dress was wasted while sitting, after all. She raised a slender green hand and beckoned them over. Her outfit was meant to convey elegance and confidence, though to be honest, she felt vaguely ridiculous among the plastic tables and cheap food. Even still, they seemed impressed, spending a moment in wordless appreciation of her tall frame, generous proportions, and vector-straight, razor-precise curtains of shoulder-length raven-black hair. Corl came over to her side, and the men hesitated.

Not that she could blame them. Even those who were not prejudiced against Urseminites tended to be startled by Corl's tight, hot-pink tee-shirt. Every so often, someone would work up the nerve to tease him about it, and this made Corl very happy.

It didn't look as though it would be a problem today, however, because the three men gave him a wide berth, and crowded together into one side of the faux-leather booth. Noxie sat across from them, and scooted over to let Corl join her.

The man on the right introduced himself as Cory Pax, the man who had requested their services. His associates were former shipmates, Julius Fogel and Doog.

"Just Doog," he said. "Can we eat?"

Noxie smiled. "Of course, be my guest. I'm sure you're hungry."

Doog. Not exactly a sophisticated nickname, but she had to admit it suited him. And after all, if a Ken Reeg couldn't understand the appeal of nicknames, who could?

§ § §

Julius and Doog left to order food at the counter, but their captain remained behind. "It's nice to meet you in person, Ms. Trick," he said, "But I thought we were meeting you alone." He glanced at Corl, who belched. "I don't have anything against Urseminites who haven't

given me cause for it. But why is he here?"

Noxie declined to answer, looking instead to Corl, who paused for a moment of contemplation before speaking. "I am here because they pay me to only beat up people who aren't our clients. Are you going to be our client?" He smiled. "You don't have to be, you know; if you're uncomfortable with the arrangements."

"You're not our first jumpy client, Mister Pax," continued Noxie. "We're strictly a legal enterprise, but people don't habitually hire mercenary escort ships unless they have reason to suspect they are at risk. This, by extension, puts us at risk, and can do so even before the contract is formalized." As she spoke, she watched the man's face: controlled, but anxious. Tiny flickers of resentment when she used big words. TransGalaxy contractors, as a group, tended to embrace the "greasy-collar" aesthetic. Even their nickname, "Bulldogs," evoked the gruff, unrefined, ugly but tough image that they so-often cultivated. These three struck her as a bit more naïve than most. She made a mental note to friendly-up her vocabulary. "Corl here keeps me safe, and keeps our clients safe while we're docked. You get that, right?"

"Yeah, I get that," he said, relaxing somewhat. "So how do we do this then? Never needed to hire a fighter escort before."

"We could start with why exactly you feel you need us."

Cory looked down at his hands and cleared his throat. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable getting into that. We just want you to fly with us to Arsubar. You know... just in case."

Noxie nodded. "Mister Pax, I don't want you to feel like you have to tell us anything. Escorting your ship from here to Arsubar we can handle, and for basic protection, we don't really need to know more. If all you need is for our guns to scare away the Barracado pirates and discourage bored customs officials from demanding extra bribes, we've got you covered." Noxie paused, waiting for him to meet her eye again. "However," she said, "If you think you might need a bit more than that, it would be good for us to know what we

might run into on the way there.”

He sighed. “Yeah, well, I guess that makes sense. What’s the point in hiring you to look after us if you don’t know what to look out for? Only problem is we don’t really know ourselves.”

Before Noxie could inquire further, Julius and Doog returned with their food. Noxie’s stomach grumbled. The meat patties may have been disgusting, over-processed, and laced with chemicals, but they smelled delicious. The men piled back into the booth with their trays. Doog immediately began inhaling his meal, but Julius spared a moment to nudge his captain. “So Cory, they good?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he said. “But we were just getting to the ‘why we need them part.’”

“Yeah, it’s the weirdest thing.” Doog spoke around a gigantic mouthful of chewed meat. “We’ve got three years left on our contract, right? We just unloaded a shipment here. We report in to ask if we’ve got a shipment coming back to Arsubar, or what, right? And they just straight-up buy us out, no answers asked!”

Noxie frowned, turning back to Cory. “TransGalaxy *bought out* your contracts?”

Cory nodded. “Yep, that’s the size of it. They didn’t even want the ship back. They just completely cut the tethers. We get severance pay in our accounts, we’ve got a ship. What we don’t have is any idea what the hell just happened.”

Noxie hesitated. She’d seen the missing company patches, but just assumed they had either finished their five years, or were trying to duck out early. TransGalaxy just didn’t buy people out. Technically the language was there in the contracts, with pretty favorable terms for the employee, but in practice, they could afford the favorable terms because they just never actually *did* it. TransGalaxy was *all about* squeezing every last drop. A buy-out with three years remaining was unheard of, and that plus the ship had made these three jokers into moderately wealthy men. Wealthy men who didn’t know how to be wealthy, or why any of this was happening. The hairs on

the back of her neck stood on end.

“So now you want to go back to Arsubar,” she said, at last.

“Yeah,” said Cory, “That’s home for us. We don’t really have any cargo or anything. We just want to go home.”

“Thinking of setting up a nice little local shipping service with your new freighter?”

“And compete with TransGalaxy? Are you kidding? They just paid us a lot of money to *not* ship freight anymore. I don’t think we want to dispute them on that.”

“Well, Mister Pax, Mister Fogel, and, uh... *Doog*, I plan to do a little bit of research first, but I think we can do business. You understand that our protection only extends to your time in transit. Until we leave Baldevian space, and after we enter Arsubaran space, you are responsible for yourselves. Any trouble you may find yourselves in, we will leave it to the local authorities.”

“I understand,” said Cory, “When can we meet your captain?”

“My apologies, but you cannot,” said Noxie. “Captain Curoç doesn’t leave his ship, and he doesn’t meet clients. He pays me well to handle that part of the business in its entirety. If you have any further questions, you may ask me. Should there be anything I cannot answer, I will forward the question to him and get back to you.”

“Oh man!” shouted Doog. “Curoç? Your captain’s a Dolom?”

Noxie blinked. “Is that a problem?”

Doog sank dejectedly into his seat. Julius rolled his eyes. “Don’t mind him. He’s just always wanted to arm-wrestle a Dolom.”

“Hah,” laughed Corl. “You’d lose. That third arm of his, he wouldn’t even have to stop flying the ship while he flips you over the table.” He paused, then turned to Noxie. “That sounds like fun, actually. What do you say, Nox, can we get these two together?”

“I do recall just mentioning the whole subject of not meeting clients. I could attempt your arm-wrestling challenge on his behalf, but I fear that I would prove a disappointment, having studied law

rather than feats of strength.”

Doog straightened up and narrowed his eyes, appraising her. Eventually, he settled back into his seat. “Nah... You just tell ’im he’s been challenged, and we’ll see what happens.”

Corl smirked. “You could always challenge me.”

“Already done an Urseminite, see?” He turned over his right hand and displayed the long thin scar running down his forearm. “I got three screws and a metal plate in there now.” He grinned. “That’s where he smashed a chair on me after I beat him.”

The preliminaries dealt with, Noxie bid their potential clients a farewell and promised to be in touch once she had presented their case to the captain. She gave Corl permission to go about his business as well, so long as he promised to get arrested before seven PM station time.

“What happens at seven?” he asked.

“Any later than that, and the authorities won’t arraign you until after the weekend. We won’t be able to bail you out and it could delay our departure.”

“Makes sense,” he said. “I won’t waste any time then.”

As she left the restaurant, she heard several diners suddenly shriek in disgust.

§ § §

“So you are saying it is a risk?” Sové Curoç continued working on the compressor assembly while he spoke: two hands resting across the workbench, third holding a mug of truly *awful*-smelling coffee. His cabin on the *Holoquest* looked more like an engineering bay than a bedchamber, but that was how he liked it. He piloted the ship, he maintained the ship, and occasionally he ate and slept enough to continue the first two activities.

“Just as a side note,” said Noxie, “I know your position on this, but we *could* have had this conversation while I was still planet-side,

and saved me a couple of shuttle rides.”

“No, I will not communicate through any government. This is non-negotiable.”

“It’s not a government, Sové, it’s just a radio, but fine, we don’t need to have this discussion again. To answer your question, yes, I think the job is a risk.”

“Of course, protecting those who need it is always a risk.” He swiveled his head around to take a sip from the mug. “I understand that you know this, and do not always make a point of mentioning it.”

“There’s something strange about this one. TransGalaxy would not have bought out their contracts without reason. I want to know what that reason is, but if they *are* in danger, then running into the people who know why is exactly what we would hope to avoid.”

“What has your research told you?”

“There is precedent for buy-outs, but those are all cases where there was some other party involved. Some planetary or station government negotiates with TransGalaxy for an officer that they want to employ. According to the contracts, the company buys out the employees, but it always happens in the context of some other negotiation. That doesn’t seem to be the situation here. Whatever reason TransGalaxy has to cut them loose has been kept out of the official record, and even our poor homeless Bulldogs don’t know why.”

Sové sipped his coffee again. “An interesting puzzle, to be sure.”

“If I hadn’t met them, I’d assume they ran afoul of some very important people in a really substantial way, and TransGalaxy was buying them out just to sever all ties. But I can’t imagine these guys doing anything bad enough to warrant the amount of money involved. What’s more, whatever they would have done, it happened without them even knowing about it. Doesn’t add up. I think that whatever offense may have been committed, these guys are just the patsies.”

“Is TransGalaxy the offender then, do you think?”

“It’s possible, but that still leaves us in the dark. If these guys have someone after them, it won’t be TransGalaxy, it will be whoever TransGalaxy is trying to protect themselves from.”

“Any clues in their last couple of shipments?”

“Not really. Their last shipment was some specialty stones used for landscaping, delivered here from some tiny rock on the edge of the Frontier Zone. Before that, it was computer parts. Before that, refrigerated containers of root vegetables, delivered to Infocity.”

“Did they learn something they shouldn’t have there?”

“Sové, anything is possible. That’s my point. Whatever happened, it won’t be on the public record. The only hint of anything suspect I could find is that this landscaping company they delivered to here has only existed for a few weeks. But there could be plenty of perfectly innocent explanations for that. Is it a front? Maybe, but maybe it’s just a new company, getting into the business. There are too many unknowns here.”

“You believe the men to be honest and in legitimate need.”

“Yes. Definitely in over their heads. They just... Well...”

“They just what? Please finish your thought.”

She laughed. “Sorry, I only stopped because I realized what I was about to say would answer the question for you.”

“Oh?”

“They just want to go home.”

Sové took a deep breath, and swiveled his head to the porthole. “Well there it is then. Please let them know we would be happy to escort them.”

She rolled her eyes, then smiled. “Yes, sir.”

“Good, I will prepare us for departure.”

“You know,” she said, “Helping needy people who just want to go home doesn’t always turn out the way you expect.”

“That’s true,” he said, and put down the compressor. Without turning his body, he swiveled his head to face her and strode directly

across the room to her. Thankfully, he handed the foul-smelling mug to the hand pointed away from her, and placed his two other hands on her shoulders. “That is true. But one time, the unexpected consequence was a new employee and a good friend. So perhaps it is a good precedent.”

She grinned. “There was one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“One of them wants to arm-wrestle you.”

He frowned, glancing for a moment at one of his massive hands. “Why?”

“Because he wants to test himself against a Dolom.”

Sové walked back to the workbench, swiveling his head back to the compressor. “We will escort them home, but he should find a different Dolom arm to wrestle. There are plenty around.”

Noxie snickered. “Captain Curoç, was that a joke?”

He did not answer.

§ § §

The computer chimed, and Noxie looked up from her legal journals. They had left Baldevian Space without incident, and now the navigation system indicated that they were crossing the halfway point to Arsubar. It was three AM ship-time, and Noxie kept watch, as she always did, while the others slept. An obvious solution, of course, given that Ken Reeg had no need for sleep. However the routine suited her. Corl and the Captain were able to maintain a more stable routine for their own resting needs, which in her experience produced better morale.

She had spent some time on ships that used a rotating watch schedule, and disruptions to their normal rhythms made many of the sleep-needing races irritable and slow. She shuddered, grateful once again that she did not need to spend one third of the day unconscious and half of the rest at less than peak efficiency.

Further, it meant that every day included many hours of quiet, allowing her to research without interruptions. In the Frontier Zone, the many jurisdictions and governments changed so rapidly that keeping up with all the legal implications would be a full-time job for an entire law firm. Fortunately, she had a knack for it, and followed legal journals the way that sports fans followed their favorite teams.

Her current focus was an article about modifications being made to anti-discrimination policies on Job Tower. She had her own reasons to hate Boss Fallon, but at least the bastard recognized that expanding opportunities was in his own best interest. She was just about to follow some of the cited references when another ship appeared on the proximity grid. The computer had been set to flag ships on an intercept course. She set an alert condition to wake Corl and Sové, then signaled the Bulldogs on their ship as well. Julius was on watch there and acknowledged.

She had instructed Captain Pax to stay close and maintain radio silence except for a direct ship-to-ship link with the *Holoquest*. If they did run into anyone, Noxie would do all the talking. The ship was closing on them, fast. Noxie watched the proximity sensor.

Very fast.

She bumped up the alert level.

Sové entered the bridge. “We have contact then?”

“Yes, sir. The clients have acknowledged and they’re following instructions so far. This thing is coming in fast. We don’t have any communication yet, but we should be able to get a read on their transponder soon.”

“This is Captain Pax.” He signaled from the other ship. “What’s happening?”

“There’s something headed our way,” said Noxie. “We’ll keep you posted. In the meantime, we’re assuming a position between them and you. Make sure you guys stay in our shadow until we tell you otherwise.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

“I’m up!” Corl shouted from the corridor. “I’m up! You can turn off the damn alarm now.”

She silenced the klaxon, then moved aside to let Sové take the pilot’s seat.

“The computer is processing the transponder data now,” he said. “So we should... Oh, *crocta*.”

Noxie leaned in closer. “What is it?”

“The ship is a Devalkamanchan Destroyer.”

Noxie’s heart sank. “Sové, we can’t take on a destroyer.”

“I have run simulations that suggest victory would be possible with a probability of three percent.”

“Define ‘victory’ in that scenario.”

“We take them with us.”

“Well then,” said Noxie, “Let’s hope they’re willing to talk.” She keyed the link to the Bulldogs. “Captain Pax. Any idea what the Templari might want with you?”

“What do you mean the Templari? Is that ship a *Templar*?”

“They are within communications range,” said Sové. “What do you suggest, Noxie?”

She nodded, thinking. “Send them our registered flight plan and all our cargo manifests and permits. Show them we have a legal right to be out here and tell them exactly what we have. If they’re here, they know all that already, but if we hide anything they’ll blow us out of the sky without another word.”

“Understood,” he said, and sent the information. “They have received the data and have initiated a comm channel.”

“Answer it on the main screen,” she said.

The display changed to show the bridge of the destroyer. A Templar stood in the middle of the screen, trim and severe in full dress uniform. His jacket bore a small but significant number of medals. She didn’t recognize all of his medals, but one of them indicated him as a member of Kamanch’s Fist, the Devalkamanchan order of holy

warriors.

“I am Commander Jocaar Baan, of the Devalkamanchan destroyer, *Righteous Fury*. You will stand aside and allow us to take the Arsubaran freight vessel into custody.”

“Greetings,” she said. “I am Noxie Trick, executive officer of the private vessel *Holoquest*. Captain Curoç has asked that I speak for him. We have entered into a legal contract with the Arsubaran vessel to escort them home. They have authorized me to speak on their behalf. They are not presently carrying any freight. We would ask your reasons to place them under arrest and the legal jurisdiction you will follow in doing so.”

“Legal jurisdiction?” The Commander sneered. “As though any of your anarchic Frontier territories could be considered a proper jurisdiction.”

Noxie nodded. “That may be so, but we are currently in neutral space. As I am sure you know, all arrests performed in neutral space must be done with documented cause and an assigned legal jurisdiction for the purposes of prosecution. To do otherwise is a violation of the Treaty of Arsubar. A Devalkamanchan Commander would never do such a thing, of course, so I am sure you must agree that our request for cause and jurisdiction is a reasonable one.”

Commander Baan studied her for a moment. “Of course,” he said at last. “Our charge against the Arsubarans is receipt and sale of stolen property. In this case, a container of holy artifacts: Statues of Deval and Kamanch, stolen from our government. Thus, our jurisdiction is the Devalkamanchan Republic. We intend to arrest them and return them for trial.”

He smiled. “This can be done peacefully, but as they are enemies of the state, we are granted special authority and may use any means necessary in either retrieving them or ensuring that they are no longer a threat. And so, again, we request that you stand aside and allow us to take them into custody.”

“We understand your request, Commander. If you will please

allow me a moment to consult with our clients.”

“Very well,” he said. “But test our patience at your own risk, Ken Reeg.” The display went dark.

“I hate those guys,” said Corl.

Sové, very pointedly, did not say anything.

Noxie pinged the Arsubarans. “Captain Pax. We know who’s after you now. Any ideas what they are talking about?”

Cory shook his head. “The only thing I can think of is those landscaping stones we shipped on our last haul. We only checked one of the containers. It’s possible there were statues in the others, the mass would work out. But we were assigned that job by TransGalaxy. They wouldn’t have had us shipping stolen artifacts... Would they?”

“Right here, and right now,” said Noxie, “Whether they would or wouldn’t, did or didn’t, is irrelevant. The Templari think they would and did. I don’t think we could ever persuade them otherwise.”

“So what do we do?”

“Let me discuss with Captain Curoç. In the meantime, don’t do or say anything that will get you blown up.”

“You’re not going to let them arrest us, are you?”

“Of course not,” she said, and closed the channel.

“We are, though,” said Corl. “Right?”

Noxie took a deep breath. “Sové, what do you think? We can’t defeat that destroyer if it comes to a fight. I don’t think these guys knowingly shipped stolen goods. If those statues were in their shipment, it was on orders from TransGalaxy. Maybe we just need to let them be arrested and hope they get a fair trial.”

“Trial?” Corl snorted. “Not likely. Not for Arsubarans in a Templar court. But that’s their problem, not ours. Taking on the D-K-Republic is hazard pay that even bought-out Bulldogs can’t afford.”

“It’s not necessarily that dire,” said Noxie. “Captain, the Templari are very big on doing things properly. It’s kind of their thing. It’s

actually religion to them, not just laws of convenience. So an arrest isn't good, but with the proper representation, it might not *necessarily* be—”

“No!” shouted the Dolom. “We are in neutral space! It should be sanctuary. This is not a charge and an arrest, this is a *destroyer* threatening a three-man *freighter*! We are beyond law here!”

“Well technically,” said Noxie, “There is a generally agreed-upon basis for interstellar law, but I take your point. It *is* significant that they have chosen to try and make this arrest in deep space rather than at either planet.”

Sové hesitated. “What does that mean, do you think?”

“I think it means that they want this kept quiet. If they have the proof that they are suggesting, and enough intel that they can find us all the way out here, then they should have been able to fly straight to Baldive, or even *Arsubar*, and make the arrest through official channels. They didn't even ask if we have the artifacts in our possession. This is about principle. In their minds, this is about *justice*.”

“Templar justice,” growled Sové. “Even if it is proved that they carried the statues without their knowledge, they will be executed.”

“Not necessarily,” insisted Noxie, “There is precedent for—”

“We will not hand them over to be arrested,” he declared. “If the Templari wish to follow us to *Arsubar* and arrest them there, there is nothing we can do, but I will not allow them to be taken while under our protection.”

“Come on, Curoç!” said Corl. “I'm all for fighting when fighting is what it would be, but we wouldn't make a scratch on that thing. They wouldn't even feel us!”

“I assure you,” said the Dolom, “They would definitely feel us.”

“Well,” said Corl, “That will be a very reassuring thought as our charred remains drift through deep space for all eternity.”

“Wait,” said Noxie. “I have something.”

“A plan?” asked Sové.

“More like a hunch,” she said. “But it will have to do. Put them back on.”

Soon, Commander Baan once again scowled at them from the main display.

“Commander Baan,” she said. “Have you recovered the artifacts?”

“That is irrelevant to this discussion,” said the Templar. “They are guilty and there is proof, regardless of the current whereabouts of the statues.”

“I suspect that you do not actually desire to recover the statues. They have been tainted by their contact with non-Templari, and their removal and sale in Frontier space, is that right?”

“You know our customs.”

“It’s a hobby of mine. So to be very clear, your aim is not to recover the artifacts, but merely to punish those who stole and profited from them.”

“Of course. Deval and Kamanch demand that their likenesses be honored. Those who fail to do so must be punished.”

“Under Templar law, the theft of religious icons, when proven, is punishable by death, correct?”

The Commander took a deep breath. “I suspect, Ken Reeg, that you are attempting to delay us while you make arrangements for an escape. I warn you that escape will be impossible, and that we will be forced to destroy you.”

Noxie swallowed. “Commander Baan, I am saddened that you believe we would show such disrespect to a Templar of your rank. I promise you, we intend no deception, no trickery, and no escape. However, I do believe that we share a common respect for the Law, even though we may come by this respect from different sources. I ask only that we be able to discuss this issue on that level, so that we have a firm basis from which to make our decision.”

Baan studied her through narrowed eyes. “Very well. Your pre-

vious assertion is correct. Theft of religious icons is punishable by death.”

She nodded. “And knowing receipt and sale of stolen property, may be punished by the removal of a hand, correct?”

He snorted. “A barbaric custom. Though there is historical precedent, modern courts consider this more of a metaphorical guidance for punishment than a literal requirement.”

“However, the idea remains a guiding principle for enforcement and sentencing, correct? Regardless of whether or not physical hands are literally removed.”

“That is correct. In practice, the guilty party must be punished with the loss of something of substantial value to them, something that would serve as a permanent reminder.”

“So then,” continued Noxie, “In this context, these men are not the guilty party.”

“Ridiculous! The statues were carried aboard their ship. They loaded, unloaded and accepted payment for the artifacts.”

“However,” she insisted, “They did so without their knowledge, and entirely under orders from TransGalaxy shipping. These men are not the guilty party...” She tried not to smile. “They are the *hand*.”

Baan scowled. “I do not understand how you are applying this metaphor.”

“TransGalaxy transported the stolen artifacts, and accepted payment for them. They knowingly received stolen property, and now...” She sent the Bulldog’s terminated contracts to the Templar ship. “The hand has been severed.”

The Commander peered at a display on his own screen. “I am not familiar with the terms of these contracts.”

This time, Noxie couldn’t completely hide the smile. “Feel free, of course, to study them at your leisure. The basic summary, however, is that TransGalaxy has done something extremely unusual, by permanently cutting all ties with these men, at great expense. This is

a loss of something substantial, and believe me, they will remember.”

Commander Baan continued reading from his display.

“Further,” she said, “Now that all ties have been severed between them, additional punishment of these men would have no effect whatsoever on the people who actually made the decisions. Is it Templar justice to punish the *hand* once it has already been removed from the body?”

“Of course not,” he scoffed.

“Well then,” she said. “In order to be in full compliance with our official flight plan, we really must continue on to Arsubar now.”

“If we discover any of this documentation to be falsified...” warned the Commander.

“Of course,” said Noxie. “Once you have made the appropriate inquiries, I am certain you will discover that it is entirely proper and accurate. A Commander of your resources would have no trouble whatsoever locating us again, should that prove necessary, but I believe you will discover that the real guilty party has already been deprived of a substantial financial asset in this case. You could sue TransGalaxy for further damages, if you felt so inclined, but there would be nothing gained for you or lost for TransGalaxy through further prosecution of my clients.”

The Commander scanned a few more paragraphs from his display, then huffed. “You may go,” he said. And the screen went dark.

“Good then,” said Corl, “I’m going back to bed.”

“Thank you so much,” said Captain Pax over the ship link. “On our own, we’d be on our way to disintegration right now. How can we possibly repay you?”

“The previously negotiated fee will be sufficient, thank you,” she said.

When the destroyer had withdrawn, the alerts had been cleared, and Sové was alone with her on the bridge, he spoke. “I have taken all of my knowledge and experience, much of it very hard-earned, and

placed it in the service of outfitting this ship as best I can. Shields, engines, sensors, and of course, weapons. However, the greatest asset to my mission that I have ever acquired is you.”

He stood from the pilot’s chair, and embraced her. “The sanctuary of deep space remains intact today, and with your help, none of my contributions were necessary. Nothing could ever please me more than to become obsolete.”

“Well, I don’t think that will happen any time soon,” she said. “Not completely. Quoting regulations isn’t very helpful with the Baracado pirates.”

“Yes,” he said. “I hate those guys.”

Noxie laughed. “Yep. Me too, Sové. Me too.”

About Christiana Ellis

Christiana Ellis is an award-winning writer and podcaster, currently living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her podcast novel, Nina Kimberly the Merciless, is available in print from Dragon Moon Press, and in audio for free online, as is her podcast radio play, Space Casey. In between major projects, Christiana is also the creator and talent of many other podcast productions including Talking About Survivor, Watching 100 Movies, and Christiana's Shallow Thoughts.

Snake in the Rocks

by Nathan Lowell

Captain Roland Marx strode onto the darkened bridge and threw his lanky frame into the command chair. For all his apparent carelessness, he was careful not to bump his head on the backrest. The command chair originally came from a Hacragorkan freighter and always felt two sizes too big. He wasn't a small Arsubaran, but compared to his green-skinned helmsman, he really wasn't built for the chair. Still, he got a good deal on it when he needed to replace the last one and it suited him well enough. He scraped one slender hand across his stubbled skull and took a moment to survey the situation before speaking.

The wide curve of armorglass across the bow showed the Nagorian Shell dead ahead. Through the forward port, it looked like a shifting wall of rocks stretching as far as the eye could see in all directions. He sucked in a deep breath and glanced at the holo-pit in the center of the cramped bridge. The view didn't look much better there. The tangle of rocks and trajectories wove an uneven tapestry with the *Black Sun's* course lined in silvery-green.

Gelda Grabog sat at the helm, just in front of him and slightly to port. The position gave her a good view of the holo-pit as well as a clear view forward. It also let him look over her muscled shoulder to see the face of the helm console from his command chair. As usual, her helm display showed them centered on track, course plot spooling through her fingers.

Dixie Moondust sat directly to starboard of him at the ship's communications console. When Dixie's fingers danced, data streams sat up and took notice. Officially, she was his accountant. Unofficially, she was one of the best data mashers in Frontier space.

Taken as a whole, the bridge was only slightly larger than a walk-in closet, a mere blister on the bow with armorglass trimming.

Marx was grateful for the subdued lighting. It hid the flaking paint on the bulkheads and the battered condition of the fittings. He fingered a split in the fauxhide covering on the arm of his chair and listened to a too-loud blower fan somewhere in the helm console. It had an odd chirp in it that meant it would probably lose a bearing and need replacing soon. Someday they'd get far enough ahead on payments to do some refitting. In the meantime, everything on the ship worked fine—mostly—even if it had seen better days.

“Dixie? Anybody in the neighborhood?” he said, snapping the couch's restraints across his middle, smoothing the gray nylon coverall around his waist so it didn't bunch up under the oversized seat-belt.

She looked up from the console, her chic hair-do and impeccable makeup masked by the blue-green glow of the display in front of her. The underlighting gave her a macabre look in the dim light. “We're clear, Captain. We're still on passive scan but I'm not picking up anything.”

“You get anything from that data chip?”

“Looks like Manny's doing a little laundry.”

Marx grunted. “It's just a credit chip?”

“Looks like. There's nothing hidden on it that I can find, unless there's something buried in the matrix of the case I can't see.”

“He was in one gods-blessed hurry to get it out to Ovid. You sure?”

She gave her head a small shake. “You can never be sure, but this looks like a simple payment.”

“Maybe he's jus' rentin' a rock.” Gelda Grabog didn't look up from her helm. “While I hate ta interrupt this fascinatin' discussion on financial dealin's, we're 'bout to head into the Shell. Might wanna re-focus.”

Marx huffed out a laugh. “Keep us on track, Gelda. How's it look?”

Gelda shrugged one green-skinned shoulder. “Looks clear, so far.”

“Go to active scanning, Dix,” Marx said.

“Active scanning, Captain.”

The holo-pit added a few more chunks of rock here and there, and the silvery trail that represented their projected course narrowed and added a few small turns.

The wall of asteroids loomed in the forward port. Without any sense of transition, the iron-laced rocks suddenly surrounded them.

“I hate this,” Dixie said.

“Mind your sensors, Moondust. We’ve done it before and we’ll probably have to do it again. We’ve never been hit.”

“Yet,” Grabog said, shooting a grin at them over her shoulder.

“You’re not helping, Gelda,” Dixie said, but she had a giggle in her voice.

“You scrape any paint off the hull, Grabog, and I’m taking it out of your bonus.”

“Since when we gettin’ a bonus?” Gelda asked, her hands spidering across the helm controls as she talked. “Last I heard, we needed this job jus’ ta keep the *Sun* in the sky.”

Marx bit back a retort. The muscle-bound Hacragorkan was right. They did need the job. The moneybags on G’n’va had specific ideas about when they wanted to get paid and how much. Around the Frontier, only the Fallon gang had a worse reputation with him—saving, perhaps, the Barracado pirates. They needed this TransGalaxy delivery—and the return run—to keep the ship. The clock was counting down.

For a full hour they wove a path between the shifting asteroids. Marx tried to keep his hands from gripping the arms of his acceleration couch, but in the end the only way he could avoid it was to cross them over his chest. He hoped for a “devil-may-care” look but judging from the smirks Dixie kept throwing his way, it wasn’t working.

“We got an incoming,” Dixie said, startling them all.

She tapped her console a few times and one of the rocks displayed in the ‘pit blinked red.

“Big one, but should miss us. Plot shows it crossing our track ahead of the ship.”

“Punch retros a bit, Gelda,” Marx said.

“Punchin’ retros, Skipper.”

Her strong, green fingers tapped several times and the ship felt like it hit something for just a split second.

They watched as a half a kilometer of iron-laced rock tumbled across their path, end over end. The languid feel of its tumble masked the speed and power in the stone.

“Bah,” Gelda said. “Not even close.”

Marx let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“Close enough for me, thank you very much,” Dixie said, not looking up from her screens.

“Long’s we don’t smack into one, we should be all right,” Marx said. “I’m more worried about ships.”

Dixie shot him a glance. “Ships, Captain?”

“Yeah, vehicles that travel in space like this one.” Marx spread his hands, indicating the general environment of the bridge.

“I was more interested in which particular ships you might be concerned about, wise guy.”

He held up a hand with one finger extended.

“We have the Barracado pirates who might want to steal Manny’s cash chip.”

He held up another finger.

“Then there’s the Fallon gang itself. Who knows what Manny is really doing and if he’s trying to set up a double cross? Or if some other faction wants to steal Manny’s chip and make it look like an outsider?”

He held up a third finger.

“And last, but hardly least, we have the Devalkamanchans. There’s a fifty kilocred reward out for information leading to the arrest of one of their leaders who’s supposedly operating around here.”

“Falaa Varn,” Dixie added. “I saw the blurb before we left Job Tower.”

“Yeah, well if you two are done playin’ guessin’ games back there?” Grabog grumbled. “Is this rock goin’ ta move or what?”

Ahead of the ship, a potato shaped chunk of rock spun on its long axis.

“We should have clearance to go around it, Gelda,” Dixie said after a moment.

“Yeah, I thought so, but the tracker keeps jumpin’ around.”

“Jink around it, Gelda. It’s probably something in that rock giving an odd reflection,” Marx said.

Grabog twitched the controls a bit to port and down slightly. The *Black Sun* responded instantly and settled on a new trajectory to pass around the asteroid.

While they watched the pocked stone pass alongside, the bridge door opened and a meter long slug sailed in, head high and its mouth-parts waving.

“Hey, Flurb. Come to watch the show?” Marx said.

“Felicitations, Captain. As a point of fact, I did want to see the Nagorian Shell again.” The Tetsuashan glided across the rough deck as if it were smooth as glass, instead of being coated with nubbly skid-not. He stopped in front of the main port and turned its single large eye outward.

“Oops,” Gelda said.

“Captain, there seems to be a planetesimal in our track,” Flurb said.

“Dixie?” Marx said.

“On it. I’m on it.”

Dixie pounded on the keys for what seemed like a long time as the holo-pit blinked off and on, trying to find a course lock through the tangled skein of asteroid paths.

“Got it!” she said, just as the holo-pit steadied and showed the new course.

“All right. Now let’s see if I can steer it,” Grabog muttered.

“Settle down, sentients,” Marx said. “Stay calm and as long as we have power, we’ll be fine.”

Dixie’s head whipped around and Marx felt her eyes boring into him.

“What?”

“You didn’t really say that, did you?”

“Say what?”

All the lights on the bridge went dark. The consoles died and Marx even heard the air blower fans spinning down in the ducts.

“That,” Dixie said.

“Captain, we seem to be closing on the asteroid,” Flurb pointed out.

The emergency power came on, washing the bridge in blood colored light.

“Helm’s not answerin’, Skipper,” Grabog said, repeatedly hitting the controller.

“Scan is out, too,” Moondust said.

Marx slapped the intercom switch. “Trev, we need maneuvering power up here.”

Several long seconds passed before the Dolom engineer answered.

“Yes, Captain. We have lost fusion containment. I require a few minutes to bring the system back online.”

“Go!” Marx shouted into the pickup. “Don’t acknowledge. You’ve got about forty seconds before we slam into a rock.”

The seconds ticked off like treacle through a sieve. They watched the asteroid grow closer and closer in the forward port, even as the large one they'd steered around slipped by beside them. It felt like they were being enclosed in churning, spinning rock.

Marx tasted bile in the back of his throat.

Flurb turned one eye back to face the bridge. "I fear your estimate might have been an exaggeration, Captain. I believe we have at least two minutes before we crash on the planetesimal ahead of us."

Marx barked out a single laugh. "I hope you're right, Flurb."

The console fans powered up and their displays began to glow.

"Get us parallel with the surface, Grabog. We don't have time to dodge."

"Roger that, Skipper." Gelda flicked the yaw controls and the ship started tilting even before she finished speaking.

"Ninety seconds to impact, Captain."

"*Can* we dodge it, Dix?"

"Not without main power, Captain."

Flurb slipped over to Dixie's console and extended its neck to look down at her display.

She sat back a bit to give it room.

"We're burnin' through thruster fuel fast," Grabog said.

"Extend landing skids."

"We're slowing. Eighty seconds to impact," Dixie said.

Flurb extended a manipulator and pointed to something on Dixie's scanner display. "What is that, Dixie Moondust?"

She cocked her head and peered at it.

"Looks like ice."

"Captain, if you can land there, it might be advantageous."

"At these temperatures, it's probably harder than the rock," Marx said, frowning in concentration.

"Quite likely, but the heat from the thrusters will melt some of

it. The out-gassing should provide a bit of cushion as will the softened slush.”

“Dix?”

“Jink us a bit to port and aft, Gelda,” Moondust said, eyeballing the display.

“Jinkin’ now.”

“There. That should be lined up.”

“You might also consider firing the anchors at about twenty meters, Captain.”

“Forty seconds to impact,” Dixie said.

“Anchors? I don’t want to stay there.” The rationale struck him just as the words left his mouth. “Do it, Gelda. The reaction will give us a bit of a kick in the slats.”

He slapped the intercom switch again.

“Brace for impact in thirty seconds, Trev.”

The proximity alarm blared.

Marx made a cutting motion and Dixie killed the klaxon.

“Fuel’s gettin’ critical here,” Gelda said.

“Burn it.” Marx said. “Won’t do us any good bleeding into space if we hit hard enough to crack the tanks.”

He didn’t mention that any strike that solid would crack them as well. He didn’t need to.

“You’re gonna take this outa my bonus, aren’t ya,” Grabog said.

“Survive the impact. We’ll worry about that later,” Marx said.

The rocks sliding by the forward screen from bottom to top made it look like the ship was dropping down an elevator shaft. Marx found it disorienting.

“Stand by to fire anchors,” Dixie said.

Gelda flipped the safety covers open with one hand.

Marx keyed the shipwide intercom and barked, “Brace for impact. Brace for impact.”

“Fire anchors,” Dixie said.

Gelda slapped all eight studs with a swipe of her hand.

The ship’s skeleton carried the bang all the way to the bridge.

Marx felt the slap in his backside as the explosive charges on all eight anchors fired at once. It barely had time to register before the *Black Sun* smashed into the puddle of ice and everything went dark.

§ § §

Marx tasted blood in his mouth and the sharp reek of hot circuit boards filled his nose. A bit of light came in from the ports but he didn’t see any flicker of flame.

“Dixie?”

He heard a groan from his right. “Yeah. Here, Captain.”

“Gelda?”

“Me, too. But I won’t be takin’ on any pit fights soon. I feel like I just lost that one.”

“Flurb?”

Marx saw the Tetsuashan’s head and single eye rise in silhouette at the front of the bridge. “I am fine, Captain. I have some minor bruising.”

Emergency lighting reset and came back on, painting the bridge in stark red once more.

Dixie lay back on her couch, massaging her head with one hand. Gelda alternately shook and then examined a finger on her right hand, twisting it this way and that in the ruddy glow. Her green skin was hard to pick up, but her tattoos seemed to glow with a light of their own.

Flurb seemed unhurt and turned its head to look outside once more.

Marx snapped the intercom. “Trev? You still with us back there?”

A few moments passed before the sonorous voice answered.

“Still here, Captain, although I seem to have injured one arm.”

“Is it still attached?” Marx asked.

The pause was longer than he expected. “Yes. I believe so, Captain. I will require medical attention when we get to the Emporium, but it was my tertiary hand.”

Gelda chuckled. “I’d be surprised if it’s not broken. He doesn’t count it as a problem because he still has two.”

“Can you get console power back? We need to see what’s going on,” Marx asked.

In reply the bridge consoles all flickered as they rebooted.

“That should give you consoles. I need to check the general power grid and environmental systems, Captain. The ship’s integrity seems to be intact. Pressure is stable.”

Marx looked over to Dixie. Her fingers flashing on keys. The console screens flickered in response.

“Confirmed, Captain. Ship pressure is constant. No alarms.”

“Gelda?” he asked.

She sat hunched over her console. One hand tapped a key. “Not good, Skipper. We’re at about three percent on reaction fuel. Gettin’ off the rock isn’t going to be much of a problem, assumin’ we’re not frozen down.” She shook her head and looked over her shoulder at him. “After that? Dockin’ again could be a real bitch, assumin’ we don’t fetch up against the next rock along the course.”

Flurb’s eye blinked. “The ice outside should give us needed mass, Captain.”

Gelda’s head bobbed slowly as she considered it.

“We still need the volatiles to fire it up, but it’s a start.”

A groan shook the ship as the air recycling system came online. Marx smelled more burnt circuitry on the air that blew past his face.

“Are you sure we’re not on fire, Dix?”

She flipped through a couple of screens before shaking her head. “Not that I can see, Captain, but I smell it, too.”

“Flurb? Any olfactory analysis on the odor in here?”

The Tetsuashan became very still for a moment, and then his head waved from side to side. “Interesting aroma, Captain. Mostly burned dust and a hint of a synthetic ester. Melted not burned.”

“Terrific,” Marx muttered. “So, somewhere there’s a board that’s been stressed enough to melt a little but not bad enough to break.”

“My senses would support that conclusion, Captain.” Flurb ducked his head twice in agreement.

“Dix? Run some diagnostics? See if you can find it?”

“On it, Captain.”

“Trev?” Marx said into the intercom. “What’s the story down there?”

“We’ve lost fusion containment for the moment, but the bottle is intact. It’ll take a few hours to get pressure back so we’ll have full power, Captain.”

“I will endeavor to help, Captain,” Flurb said, sliding toward the hatch.

“You know about fusion bottles, Flurb?”

His eye swiveled to face the captain. “I have crawled through my share of engineering spaces, Captain. There may be some assistance I can render Mr. Malioç.”

“Trev? Flurb’s on his way down.”

“Excellent, Captain. I could use the help.”

“Anything any of us can do?”

“No, Captain. With Flurb’s help, I believe we will be able to restore power in record time.”

Marx keyed the intercom off and stared at it.

“Problem, Captain?” Dixie asked.

“I think I’ve just been put in second place behind a slug in utility.”

Grabog snickered. “I doubt that, Skipper.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because if it were me? I’d put you last.”

Dixie giggled.

Marx harumphed.

An alarm pinged twice. “Contact, Captain,” Dixie said, her voice all business.

“Any ID?” he asked.

“Transponder code says it’s a courier out of Farnham’s. The *Blue Parsec*.”

“What kind of name is that?” Gelda asked.

“Probably some inside joke,” Marx said, his eyes scanning the horizon outside the ship. “Where away, Dix?”

“They’ve gotta be pretty close. Picking their way through the rocks, I’d say.” Dixie slapped a couple of keys and the holo-pit started to glow, then subsided.

“Gelda? Could you—?” Dixie asked.

Gelda reached out with one foot and gave the pit a good kick.

It fired up, showing the rocks around them and one flashing, red dot.

Marx found himself tilting his head to get the proper perspective on it and then looked out to where the slowly spiraling asteroid twisted the horizon. “It should be coming up on the horizon any second, I think,” he said.

“Agreed, Captain.” Dixie leaned a little sideways in her couch to try to see.

Gelda sitting closer to the port and off to the side a bit said, “There it is. Coming up now and burning hard.”

As the asteroid spun further, the oncoming craft became clear—its main drive burning brilliance onto the rocks it passed.

“That pilot’s got a death wish,” Grabog muttered. “He’ll never make it through the shell at that speed.”

“Passive scan only, Dixie.”

“Passive only, Captain.”

The display in the holo-pit lost some of its sharp clarity, but kept contact with the ship.

“We gonna ask for help?” Grabog asked.

Marx shook his head slowly from side to side. “I don’t know yet. Something’s not right here.”

The rotating asteroid brought the courier higher in their sky.

“They’re in one major hurry,” Grabog said, never taking her eyes off the ship. “And does that look like a courier to you?”

As soon as she said it, the seed in the back of Marx’s brain blossomed into full flower. “That looks way too big to me.”

“Me, too, Captain,” Dixie said gazing down at her scanner display. “It’s calling itself a courier, but that’s more like a small freighter according to the scanners.”

“You’re still on passive?”

“Yes, Captain. Passive only.”

“Kill our transponder.”

She tapped a few keys. “It’s off, Captain.”

Grabog looked back at them over her shoulder. “Paranoid, much? They might be able to spare some thruster fuel.”

Marx shook his head. “Even if they wanted to stop, they’d be out of the shell before they could get turned around.”

“Assuming they don’t hit a rock on the way out,” Dixie added.

A whooping alarm blatted through the bridge, startling them all.

Marx felt the blood drain from his face as he scanned the boards and then looked back out.

“Target radar signature, Captain,” Dixie said.

“Is it painting us?” he asked.

The alarm went silent.

“Apparently not, Captain. We didn’t get locked.”

“What the—”

Before he could finish the thought, a red-orange streak shot out from between two rocks. A red and white blossom of fire and atmosphere grew silently out of the front of the ship above them, setting the vessel tumbling wildly, even as their main engines fired for a few more seconds.

Defensive fire came from the crippled vessel for a few moments before counter-defense lasers stripped away the turrets that appeared suddenly along the sides of the hull.

“Lotta teeth for a courier,” Grabog said, pulling at one ear.

“Yeah, and who’s shooting at her?” Dixie asked. “I’ve got nothing but rocks on the scan.”

The answer became clear in the next moment as a dark-hulled vessel emerged from the tangle of asteroids and nosed toward the tumbling hulk.

“Barracado,” Grabog hissed.

“Must be,” Dixie said. “No transponder and with that much fire power, they’re not a freebooter.”

“Yeah,” Marx said. “That was elegant.”

The intercom came on with a quiet warning tone. “Captain, we should have main engines up in the next few minutes. We are very low on thruster fuel, but should be able to take off shortly.”

Marx keyed the pickup. “Get them ready but don’t light up yet. We’ve got company up here and I’d just as soon not put a candle in the window for them.”

“Company, Captain?”

“Yeah. There was a snake in the rock pile.”

“A snake, Captain? Barracado?” Trev asked.

“Looks like. I’m not curious enough to find out for sure.”

There was a short pause before the engineer responded. “Please, do not feel obligated to ascertain the truth on my behalf, Captain.”

Grabog snickered and swiveled her couch to look back at Marx. “Did the big lug just make a joke?”

“I think so,” Dixie said.

“Keep working down there, but don’t do anything that might get their attention. We’ll be rolling behind the rock in a few minutes and out of their view.”

“Roger that, Captain.”

They watched as the dark vessel matched trajectory with the tumbling hulk and space suited figures—tiny blobs in the distance—started swarming the hull.

Marx shuddered, imagining what must be happening aboard the ship. He hoped the crew had died in the initial attack. Barracado had unsavory habits when it came to living victims.

When rotation took the ships out of sight, he was able to focus.

“Any luck with the melted board, Dixie?”

“No, Captain. Whatever it is, it’s not bad enough to trigger any degradation in performance. I’ve checked all the systems I can. It could still be in main power, or active scanner. Those show nothing on diagnostic, but under load it might be different.”

“Gelda, let’s go chip some ice, shall we?”

She grinned. “That’ll be a good workout.”

“Just think of it as getting into shape for the next pit match.”

“Oh, I am, Captain. Trust me, I am.”

“Keep an eye open, Dix. See if you can spot the faulty board and keep an eye on our friends over there, as much as you can.” He stood and headed for the hatch. “Just don’t use the radios unless they’ve already spotted us.”

“Roger that, Captain,” she said. “But I think you’ll know if they have.”

He paused at the hatch, Grabog stopping behind him. “How’s that?”

“The incoming missile and corresponding explosion would

probably be a clue.”

“Well, let’s hope they don’t blow the ship up before we get back aboard.”

Grabog snickered. “You wanna be here when it blows up?”

Marx looked at her for a moment. “Do you want to sit on this rock until the air runs out in the suits? Or until they send down the boarding party to pick over the hull and find us alive?”

The humor drained out of her visibly, like air from a balloon. She swallowed once.

“Yeah,” Marx said. “I didn’t think so.”

§ § §

After two hours on the surface, Marx felt like a twist of limp pasta. The parts of him that hadn’t been battered by the crash landing cried from the heavy exercise of carving out ultra frozen blocks of ice and hefting them into the open lock. The suit chafed and the recycled air tasted of aluminum. It made his teeth ache.

He waved an arm and motioned Gelda back into the lock. Through the transparent helmet, she looked about as bad as he felt.

She finished carving the last block and tossed it into the lock before clambering in with it and giving him a hand up.

The closed the outer door and began the cycle.

Inside, he popped his helmet off. The ship’s air smelled like home. He took a minute to catch his breath before clomping the hardsuit back to its storage locker.

“Carvin’ ice isn’t much like bein’ in the pit,” Grabog said from across the narrow corridor.

“How’s that?” he asked.

“In the pit, somebody’s tryin’ to kill you and you get to fight back. Out there? The ice didn’t put up much of a fight.”

“No, but the Barracado would have killed you if they could.”

“They weren’t here for me to beat on,” she said, a fierce grin

lighting her eyes.

Marx laughed and finished crawling out of his hard suit.

He padded aft and stuck his head into the engineer's space.
"Trev?"

The tripodial Dolom stuck his head up from behind a rack of equipment.

"Here, Captain."

"Where do we stand on repairs?"

"Main engines are ready to test when you are ready for them. The ice should give us enough reaction mass, but we are very low on volatiles. Without those, the mass is of limited utility."

Marx nodded. "Thanks. Give some thought on how we'd make it through the Shell without thrusters, if you would."

Trev shook his head. "If you decide to try it, I believe I will stay here and take my chances on the rock, Captain."

Marx waved a hand and headed up to the bridge.

"Any luck on that burned board, Dixie?"

She looked up from her console with a frown. "No, Captain, and it's probably not something we're going to find until it fails."

He grimaced. "Unfortunately, I agree with you."

He flung himself into the command couch and stared out at the shortened horizon.

"What are the neighbors up to?"

Her eyes followed his gaze.

"During the last pass, it seemed like they got what they wanted. The activity levels fell off pretty quickly, but they were still hanging in there. I'm not sure what they're doing now."

Grabog stepped onto the bridge in a fresh, dry ship suit. She was in the habit of ripping the sleeves off them at the shoulder and it gave her an intimidating appearance with the Hacragorkan tribal tattoos up both arms, over her shoulders, and under the frayed fabric of the suit.

“Anything new?” she asked.

“Nope. Still waiting,” Dixie said.

“We’re gonna wait a long time if we don’t find some volatiles,” Gelda said.

Marx groaned and scrubbed his eyes with his fingers. The eyeballs felt gritty enough to have been made out of sand. When he took his hands away, the battered hulk with its pirate companion were just rising over the asteroid’s horizon. He was startled by how close they looked.

“Dix? They’re still moving in our direction?”

“Momentum is going to carry them right over our heads in a few hours,” she said.

“What if they look down?” Gelda asked.

“If the timing is right, we’ll be on the back side of the rock at their closest approach.”

Marx looked at Dixie with a raised eyebrow.

She gave a half-hearted shrug. “I calculated it out.”

“Will it be enough?” Gelda asked, slouching at her own console and looking over the display.

“As long as we’re quiet, there’ll be a few kilotons of dolomite between us and them. I couldn’t see them under those conditions, even with active scanning.”

“What else can we do?” Marx said.

“Heat!” Dixie said with feeling. “I didn’t think about that.”

A deep voice from behind them said, “The heat exchangers are the only anomalous heat source, Captain, and they’re along the ventral side of the ship. The hull itself and all the external rocket parts are already close to background temperature already. The hull should mask the heat signature.”

They turned to find Trevanian looming in the doorway to the bridge. He carried one arm in a sling, but his other two hands flexed as he talked, as if looking for a wrench to hold.

“I am more concerned with how we can get out of here without volatiles for the thrusters,” Trev said.

“One emergency at a time,” Marx muttered. “We need to be here—alive—after the Barracado leave.”

“Assuming we survive the Barracado, Captain. I have a plan for getting volatiles, but it will mean going outside again,” the huge engineer said.

“Why does this not fill me with hopeful enthusiasm?” Marx asked.

Trevanian shrugged two of his shoulders. “I do not know, Captain. I have observed that you tend toward pessimism in many situations. Perhaps this is one of them.”

Grabog snickered.

Marx sighed. “You people don’t seem to be taking this very seriously. If we don’t get off this rock, we’re gonna die a lingering death.”

Dixie sat back in her couch and grinned. “You have a real knack for encouraging the crew, Captain. You might want to point out the probabilities that we could also die quickly with a Barracado missile stuffed up our exhaust ports.”

Grabog looked up from her console. “Don’t forget we could get squashed between two asteroids on the way into the Emporium.”

Marx turned to Flurb. “Don’t you have anything to add?”

Flurb’s mouth parts waved back and forth a couple of times. “There are less probable negative outcomes, Captain. We could be victims of a fire aboard. The fusion bottle might rupture. There is still the problem of a melted board somewhere.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“Actually, no, Captain,” Flurb said. “We also do not know where the Devalkamanchans operate in this sector. We could run into a Templar gunboat, or even be captured by a squad of Templar regulars while trapped here on this planetesimal.”

Grabog snickered.

Marx gave her his best “command stare” and she grinned back at it.

“You asked, Skipper,” she said.

He sighed and shook his head. “All right, Trev. After all that, I’m hesitant to ask, but what’s your plan?”

Trevarian reached back and picked up something from the deck outside the hatch. When he straightened up, he held a large canister with rounded ends.

“A couple of us go over to the wreck and bleed off some volatiles from it. By the time the Barracado finish, there will not be any survivors. They will not miss it. If we can fill this tank, it should be enough to get us to Ovid’s.”

Marx looked out at the twisted hulk. The last of the Barracado spacers had disappeared into their ship. The two vessels appeared visibly nearer, and were almost at the asteroid’s horizon.

“It’ll have to be on the next pass, Captain. After that, the wreck won’t be in reach of the suit’s jets,” Dixie said.

“And the Barracado will need to get out of there,” Marx said. “We can’t do anything with them hovering around.”

As they watched, maneuvering jets on the dark ship flared and the vessel began moving away. In moments they disappeared between the rocks.

Trev swiveled and started off the bridge. “I will prepare the suits, Captain,” he said, disappearing down the passage.

“Terrific,” Marx said.

§ § §

Getting into the hull had proven to be simplicity itself. The Barracado missile had split the ship like a ripe melon, leaving a lot of gaping holes with sharp edges. Marx confirmed the attackers were Barracado pirates when they found a suited figure impaled on one of the sharp points in the shattered hull plates. The distinctive triangu-

lar tattoos showed clearly through the stained faceplate.

Between them, Dixie Moondust and Captain Roland Marx were not the strongest pair on the ship. They were the most nimble. As Dixie picked her way through the wreckage, Marx appreciated his decision to bring her along instead of the stronger—and bulkier—Grabog. Gelda would have tried to push through the wreckage where Dixie seemed to dance through it.

With Barracado pirates still in the area, they kept radio silence. Marx felt surrounded by the noises in his suit. The hiss of the atmospheric regulator, the occasional alert notice for the heads-up display, and his own stomach reminding him that he hadn't had a decent meal in what seemed like days. He concentrated on those sounds and his mission, rather than the blood smeared bulkheads and the occasional vacuum-dried, flash-frozen corpse.

They found their way to the engine room without difficulty. Dixie steadied the tank while Marx attached the bleeder valve the way Trevanian had shown him. A few twists of the zero-torque wrench and the tank's pressure gauge started rising.

Marx gave an okay gesture with his gloved hand.

Dixie nodded.

All they had to do was wait.

In the near darkness.

With Barracado pirates lurking in the rocks.

And the odd corpse floating through the engineering space.

“Terrific,” Marx muttered. His voice sounded loud in his helmet and only afterwards did he think to make sure his mic was off.

It was, but he held onto the valve for stability until his heart stopped flapping in his chest.

Dixie waved to get his attention, pointing at a corpse stuck between a chair and a smashed console.

He pushed off the bulkhead and drifted over to see what she was looking at. Being next to the body didn't help. He couldn't see

what she was so excited about.

She reached down and pulled the wig off the corpse's hairless skull revealing pointed ears.

What he'd taken for vacuum discoloration stood revealed as purple skin.

He looked up at Dixie and saw her mouth shape the word, "Templari."

Marx nodded in his helmet and started looking around the engineering section in earnest. After a few minutes of searching he didn't see anything else that looked out of the ordinary. That the bodies were Templari appeared obvious now that he knew what to look for. He kicked himself for not spotting it sooner.

"Leave it to the Ken Reeg to look beyond the wig," he muttered.

He crossed back to the tank and checked the gauge. The tank was only half full. He tapped it with a finger and the needle bumped a bit upwards. Still filling. He checked the count-down timer on his heads-up. They'd have to leave soon or risk not making it back to the ship.

He looked around and saw Dixie tugging on a cabinet door. It had a big dent in it and had warped a bit in the frame. He drifted over and between them they got it pried open. Dixie flashed a light inside. She reached in and pulled out a fist-sized chunk of something.

Turning she held it up so he could see. It didn't register until she mouthed the words, "Data core."

With a grin, she stuffed it into one of the cargo pockets on the leg of her suit.

Marx wasn't sure what she'd be able to find, but any bits at all might be enlightening.

They crossed back to the tank and Marx flicked the gauge again. The needle didn't move. He frowned. The tank was only about two-thirds full but they wouldn't be getting any more from the hulk. He sealed off the valve and disconnected the fitting.

Dixie's face held the question he had no answer for. Shrugging in a hard suit didn't do much but bump his shoulders, so he grabbed onto his end of the tank. Together they started maneuvering out through the hole they'd come in through.

They were only about half way out when Marx's heads-up beeper to tell him they were running out of time. He saw Dixie checking her screen, too, and he tried to pick up the pace.

Getting out would be one thing. Making it back to the asteroid where the *Black Sun* lay hidden, that was another whole journey—exposed to view the whole way.

He pulled Dixie to a stop at the entrance and stuck his helmet up a little to make sure there were no unpleasant surprises outside. He pulled it back in almost immediately as the dark hull of the Baracado ship slipped past the opening.

Marx felt his heart beating double time in his chest and the telemetry display on his helmet red-lined his blood pressure. He forced himself to take slow regular breaths as he watched the count-down timer click down second after second while the threat lurked just outside the hull. He swallowed back the sour bile of fear and tried to will his heartbeats to slow.

The ship hove to a couple hundred meters away. They were close enough that Marx could see the seams in its hull plates. While they watched, two suited figures left a lock on the side of the ship and drifted across toward them. They carried an oblong package between them, and passed out of sight toward the bow. In less than a minute, they were jetting back to the open lock empty handed. They'd barely gotten through the door when the larger ship started maneuvering. They were close enough that Marx saw one of the figures grab a hand hold inside the lock before the door closed. The dark ship disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

Marx started pulling the tank—and Dixie—as fast as he could out of the opening. He got his feet under him and crouched on the lip of the opening, both hands on the tank. Dixie mimicked his stance

and they pushed off together. The extra mass in the tank made moving more difficult, but once they got it going, momentum carried it. Together they applied small amounts of jet to move faster. Marx knew they didn't want too much velocity because they'd have to decelerate before they slammed into the rock on the other end.

He also needed to get some distance between them and the wreck as fast as possible.

He was just about to look over his shoulder when a searing flash lit up the sky and the surrounding rocks for kilometers around. He felt the *whump* of the explosion on his back and the shockwave of debris and the remnants of the ship's atmosphere carried them along, much too fast.

The count-down timer was ticking, but with the extra boost, he was more worried about the landing than the transit. He signaled Dixie and they turned to try to slow their advance on the jagged chunk of nickel-iron that hid their ship. The wreck was a glowing cloud of coruscating light. Odd bits and pieces of hull plate, decking, and ship fittings sailed outward.

Marx counted his luck that none of them were hurtling in their direction.

He glanced down and saw that the blast had pushed them slightly off line and he adjusted course, tugging Dixie along with him. The course adjustment took fuel and he watched as the asteroid loomed closer and closer, while the gauge on his thruster pack went lower and lower. All too soon it went into the yellow and his suit bonged an alarm in his helmet.

They were still moving too fast when the levels went red and his suit complained with a "warning" vocoder message in his ears and a flashing orange smear on his faceplate. It didn't help that seconds later the proximity alarm started shrieking as the suit's velocity sensors detected the imminent collision of suit and rock.

Even over the alarms, Marx heard the hiss of thruster jets fade out as its tanks went dry and the warnings went red. He glanced over

at Dixie. Her jets were not firing either and he could see her skin reflect warnings inside her helmet.

She pursed her lips and blew him a silent kiss just before a ka-gillion metric tons of nickel-iron rock slammed into the soles of his feet.

§ § §

The metallic *tink-tink-tink* felt really loud. Marx wished it would go away. It didn't. It just paused for a moment and then started again. *Tink-tink-tink, tink-tink-tink.*

“What the hell?” he muttered and pried his eyes open. “This is really getting old.”

He found himself looking up at Dixie Moondust through the face plates on their suits. Red warning lights smeared his view but it forced him back to the here and now.

She waved to him with a cheerful smile and straightened up. She extended a gauntleted hand down to him and helped him to his feet. The faint gravity of the asteroid helped. He tried not to think of the stabbing pain in his lower left leg. Latched on to his end of the tank, he turned toward the ship. Together they dragged it across the uneven ground toward the ship.

They met Gelda coming over the horizon. With a wave, she scooped the tank into her arms and bounded back toward the ship leaving Dixie and Marx to drag themselves back as best they could.

Other than his leg and a serious pounding in his skull, Marx felt remarkably good—almost upbeat.

The feeling lasted until he got back aboard, peeled out of the suit, and fell to the deck in normal gravity.

Trevanian looked down at him. “The leg is not broken, Captain.”

Marx groaned. “It might feel better if it was. The fuel?”

“It's not very much, but it should suffice to get us to Ovid's Em-

porium if we are sparing in its use.”

“Any new problems?”

“None that I am aware of, Captain.”

“Excellent. Now if you’d help me get to the bridge? We still have a delivery to make.”

§ § §

When the *Black Sun* finally pushed through the last curtain of rock and got a clear sighting on Ovid’s Mining Emporium, everybody on the bridge heaved a collective sigh of relief. Marx rolled a swig of coffee around in his mouth to try to clear the mucky taste of too much stress and too little sleep. It didn’t help.

“How are we on volatiles, Gelda?”

“One percent, Skipper. Should be just about enough if we don’t have to dodge a buncha miners.”

Dixie had her head buried in the console.

“You still messing with that data core?”

She answered without looking up. “Fascinating reading, Captain.”

“You broke the encryption?”

“Flurb helped.”

“Flurb?”

She shrugged, again without looking up. “He had the keys to breaking the Templar coding.”

“Are we talking about the same Flurb?”

“Meter long? Tetsuashan? Always seems to know when we’re going to be getting underway before we do?” Dixie asked, a laugh in the back of her throat. “That’s the one.”

Marx shook his head and looked back out at the tangle of pods, hangers, and docks that made up Ovid’s. “Finding anything good?”

“Some interesting stuff about Falaa Varn and one of Ovid’s asteroids that she’s renting.”

“Falaa Varn? Why’s that name familiar?”

“She’s the one that they posted the reward for? Remember back at the Job Tower?”

“Oh, the fifty kilocreds one?”

“That’s the one. The data core has little tidbits like how much she’s paying for rent, the orbital designator for her rock, stuff like that.”

“Why is she renting a rock? Templari taking up mining?”

She looked over at him then. “You do know that Ovid keeps the claims on played out asteroids, right?”

Marx grinned at her. “Yeah. Just seeing if I could get your attention. Varn’s set up shop in a rock?”

“So it seems.”

“What’s she doing?”

“Judging from this, stuff that the Fallon gang would rightfully be peeved about.”

“Templari muscling in on their turf?”

“Looks like that’s the plan.”

Gelda chuckled.

“And what’s got your humor button pressed, Grabog?” Marx asked.

“All this talk of what’s on that data core, Skipper.”

“And?”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “Looks like we’re gonna get a bonus this trip after all.”

About Nathan Lowell

Nathan Lowell was born in Portland, Maine, in 1952. He grew up in an agricultural community in rural Maine and spent time working on fishing boats along the coast. His first literary success came with the publication of a poem while still in elementary school. That early success was followed by forty years of attempt, rejection, failure, and ultimately giving up on the dream of writing science fiction. In 2007, with the rise of podcast fiction, he started writing again. He completed his first successful novel – Quarter Share – in January, 2007, and podcast it through Podiobooks.com over February and March, 2007. Since then he has written eight novels, several short stories, and a novella. His podcast novels have been finalists in the Parsec Award five times, and he's won Parsec Awards for Speculative Fiction (long form) twice — 2010 and 2011. He holds a BS in Business Administration with a minor in Marketing from SUNY/Buffalo (92), an MA in Educational Technology (98), and a Ph.D. in Educational Technology with specializations in Distance Education, Interactive Media, and Instructional Design (04). He lives Colorado with wife, two daughters, and a trio of feline companions.